

THE PRESENTATION OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN COMIC BOOKS

Renee Martin

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Illustration

in

UCO School of Design

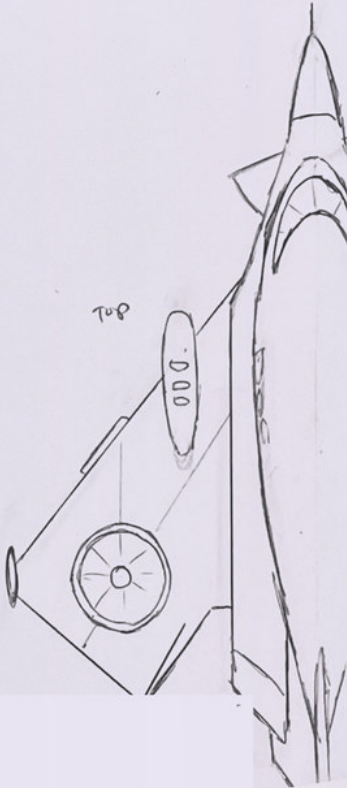
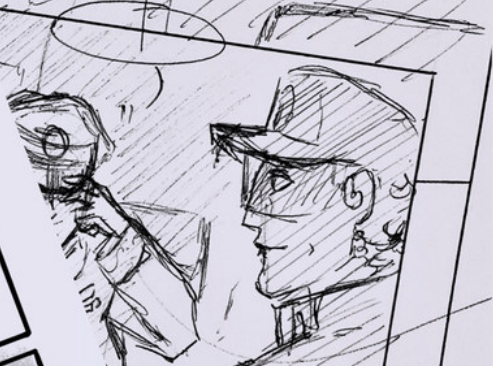
University of Central Oklahoma

May 2026



Michelle...

The Raiders are ready...



Scene 1 "Sailor Soldier Oath"



Michelle



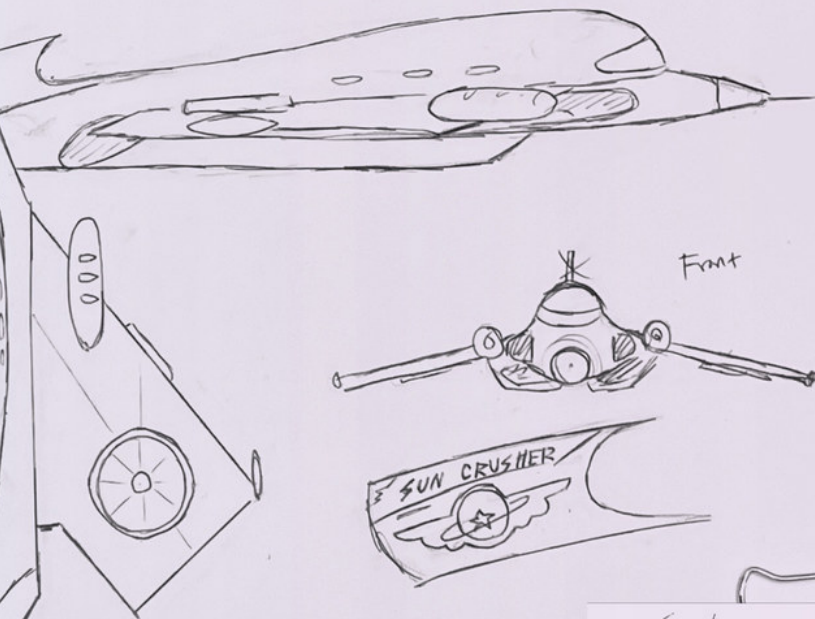
Best Friends





Don't worry...
it'll be okay.

Union unit
"Sun Crusher" 0-25 side



LET. HIM.



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My Love Letter to Women: Giving Women Agency in Comics

Thesis Title

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April 28th, 2026

Date

Jackson College of Graduate Studies at the University of Central Oklahoma

A THESIS APPROVED FOR

the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Illustration

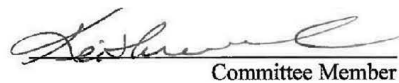
By



Committee Chairperson



Committee Member



Committee Member

ABSTRACT

Female characters in comic books are often designed to cater to male preferences and audiences (Burch & Widman, 2023). The hypersexualization of women in comics can directly influence cultural standards of women using dehumanization and objectification. This literature review examines the controversial discussion and seeks to answer this research question: *“How has the lack of realistic presentation of female characters in comics influenced and shaped societal expectations of women?”* Peer-reviewed, empirical articles were exclusively utilized by the researcher to explore this question. JSTOR, ProQuest, and Research Gate were the databases used for sourcing quality evidence that fit the following themes: female comic character stereotypes, humanization in comics, violence against women in comics, comic gender roles, and transmedia influence and comic culture. This collection of empirical data confirmed the presence of hypersexualized female characters. The data also resulted in interesting overlaps in how comics influence society’s standards, and alternatively, how society influences comic design. This overall literature review implies that male audiences are the intended demographic for comic books, and consequently, women’s sense of autonomy and self-esteem are affected by it.

Future research is encouraged to explore this seldom-charted problem in order to establish stronger connections and further investigate the relationship between society and comic books. In order to solve this problem of practice as a designer and illustrator, I am implementing this research by creating a graphic novel of my own; one that emphasizes strong women with agency.

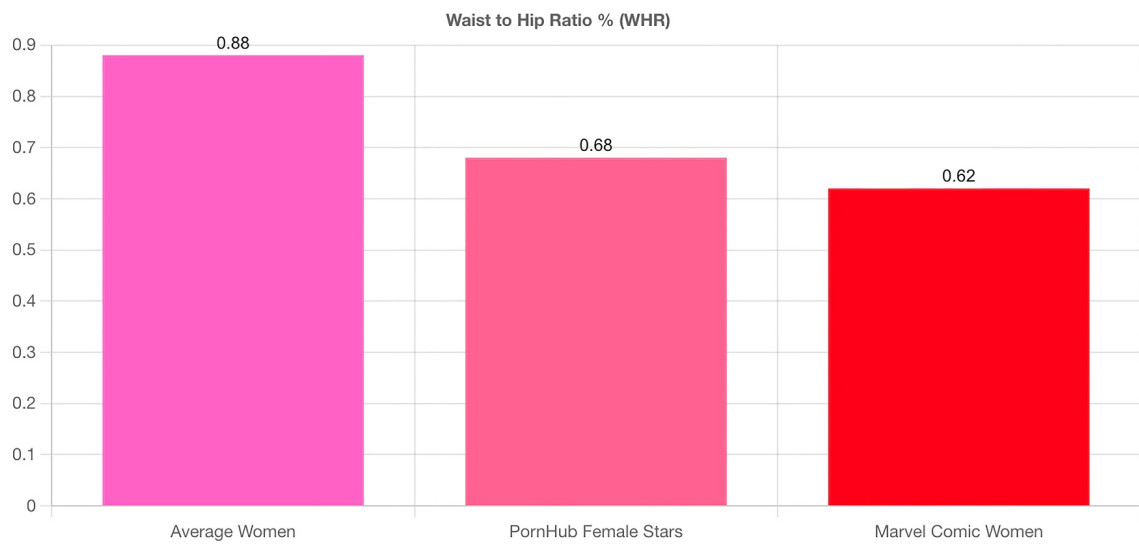
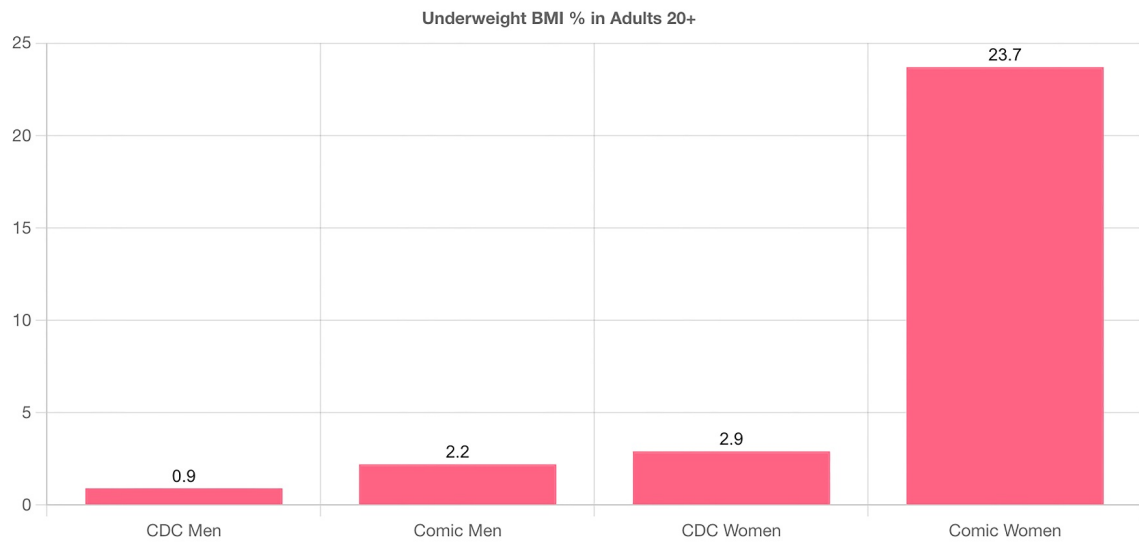
Keywords: female stereotypes in comics, hypersexualization of women in comics, transmedia influence of comics, idealism in comics, media and comic culture

THE PRESENTATION OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN COMIC BOOKS

Comic book superheroes are beloved and revered for their strength, passion for justice, and selfless actions to protect all walks of life. These characters are consequently well-respected and have been cemented as cultural icons and role models in a way that is timeless and not confined to the boundaries of the comic book page. However, the upheld idealism and stolidity of these comic book characters built a foundation of expectations by the consumers and creators alike, especially for female characters. This idealism and lack of humanistic reality in female comic book characters risks dehumanizing and objectifying women and girls in real-world society.

The consequences of this idealistic foundation foster the hyper sexualization of women and girls, which can cause objectification in women, resulting in poor mental health, body image issues, and insecure feelings of autonomy. Influential comic book stories and characters can be reimagined into films, showcasing them to a wider audience. The dehumanization of women often carries from the page to the screen. The result of women being exposed to images of objectified female characters in superhero movies included recorded feelings of diminished body esteem and equal gender role beliefs (Pennel & Behm-Morawitz, 2015).

As a future illustration professor, current art teacher and comic book creator, I understand that respectful and thoughtful representation in sequential storytelling matters. This factor is understood as an unchanging quality of society and culture, a fact of life in visual entertainment. By reviewing recent and current literature, I investigate and contribute to the understanding of the representation and portrayal of women and girls presented in comic books and how that influences real-world society.



WHAT IS "HYPERSEXUALIZATION?"

According to the American Psychological Association, sexuality is a healthy connection between mutual partners and encourages intimacy and healthy bonding. Hypersexualization or sexualization, however, is the opposite of healthy sexuality. "In contrast, sexualization occurs when: a person's value only comes from his or her sexual appeal or behavior to the exclusion of other characteristics; a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy; a person is sexually objectified - that is, made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with a capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person" (Zurbriggen et al., 2010).

The hypersexualization of women also occurs in other parts of popular culture outside of comic book character designs. Barbie dolls are designed with unvaried, specific body proportions, and iconic characters, like Max Fleischer's Betty Boop, are created and cemented as sexual objects. Pin-up photography and illustrations, along with the previously mentioned pop culture icons, are defended as feminist beauties that represent female independence and sexuality, even though their original design reflects male beauty preferences (large breasts, tiny waists, wide hips, and small or pointed feet).

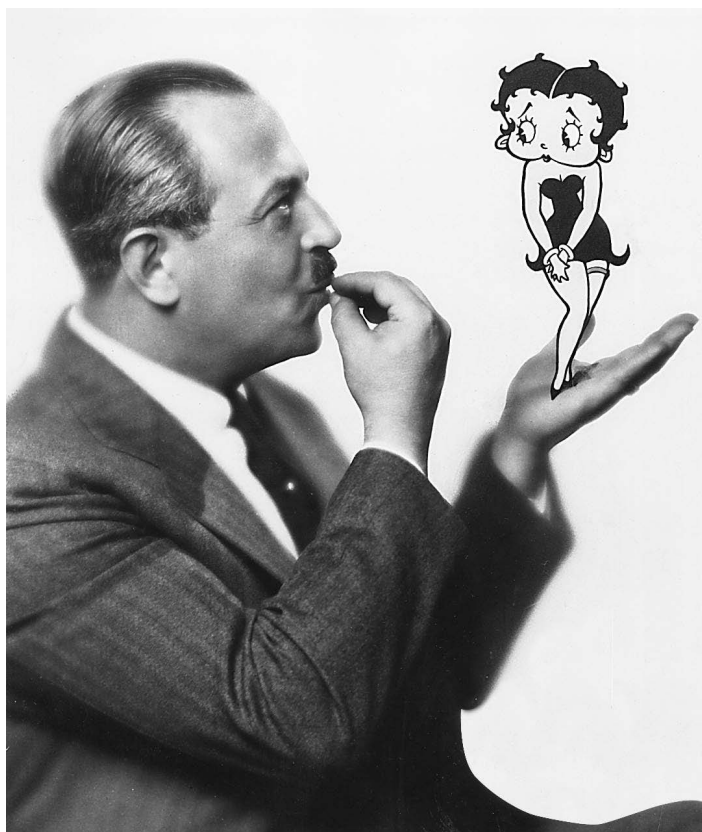


Figure 1. An example of pin-up art: an art style that sexualizes women to boost male morale. Reprinted from Planète Vintage, by G. Elvgren, 1966, Retrieved from <https://planete-vintage.com/en/blogs/blog-vintage/gil-elvren-pin-up-art?srltid=Afm-BOoqUY5UW3TMP7xdxosIDX-HPJwCcm9-KaHGNOOly21IFo-M9tqxPtf>. Copyright 1966 by Gil Elvgren.

Figure 2. Original Barbie doll design. Reprinted from History, by B. Holland, 2016, Retrieved from <https://www.history.com/articles/barbie-through-the-ages>. Copyright 2016 by Yvonne Hemsey.

Figure 3. Animator Max Fleischer with his character, "Betty Boop." Reprinted from Research Gate, by B. Hosea, 2012, Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Max-Fleischer-and-Betty-Boop-undated-Publicity-photograph_fig4_306103141.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Comic books create a foundation of popular culture on their own. This culture expands into transmedia convergences and directly develops into consumable mediums like film, video games, merchandise, cosplay, and comic cons (Poon, 2022.) Superhero comic book stories, specifically, have been projected in theaters for decades and are still being produced and reinvented today across streaming platforms in the form of film and series content. The character designs and narrative of comic books have the potential to become concrete as a timeless, influential pillar in societal entertainment and expectations. This is problematic when women are portrayed as oversexualized and dependent on men for their rescue, or their beauty overshadows their personal worth or abilities (Facciani et al., 2015).

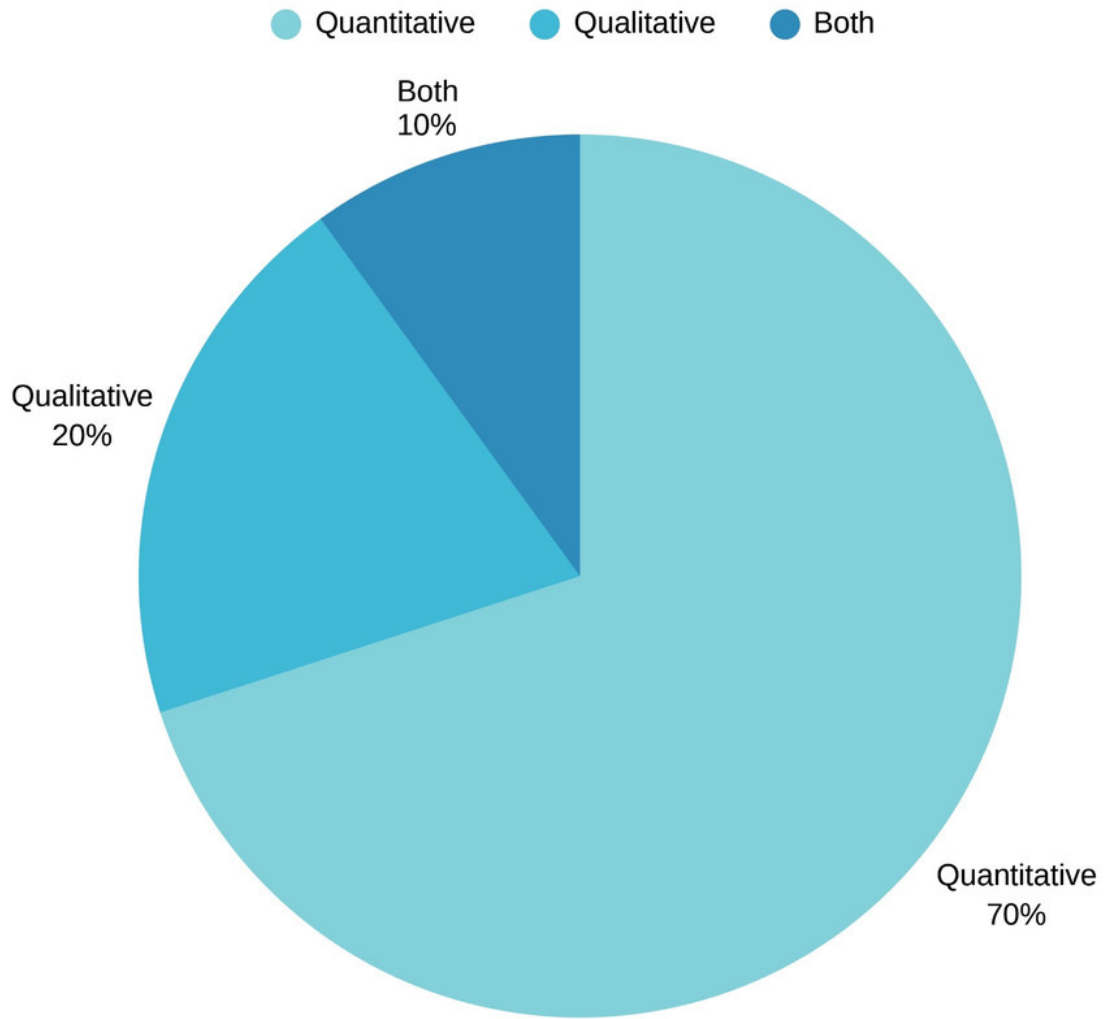
In a study conducted by Pennel and Behm-Morawitz (2015), a sample of 82 undergraduate women in a midwestern university were shown random clips from superhero comic films of hypersexualized female victim characters. The women's initial reaction was analyzed and recorded as potential positive and negative feedback. Exposure to these excerpts resulted in women with lowered body esteem and diminished egalitarian gender role beliefs. Positive feedback was scarce, but eminent in the belief of the importance of body and self-competence independently from the sexualized female comic characters in film (Pennel & Behm-Morawitz, 2015).

Women in comic books are often portrayed as helpless victims or sexualized side roles; these characters are firmly planted in exaggerated gender norms. In an analysis of Marvel Studio's comics from the Silver Age (1960) to the present day performed by Murphy (2016), female superheroes would only exist within the egos of their male counterparts. They relied on their male counterparts to make executive decisions, rescue them from danger, and give them direction in life. These dehumanized characters were also victimized in violent situations. Female characters were depicted as hypersexualized victims at different scales; from "damsel in distress," to rape victims who were "asking for it" as a result of their fashion decisions (Facciani et al., 2015).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how women are portrayed as female characters in comic books in order to discover if there is a projection from female comic book characters to real-world societal expectations of women. Comic book culture is foundational in pop culture and influences societal and political standards. More specifically, this study will seek to answer the following research question: *"How has the lack of realistic presentation of female characters in comics influenced and shaped societal expectations of women?"*

METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the research question, “How has the lack of realistic presentation of female characters in comics influenced and shaped societal expectations of women?” ProQuest, JSTOR, and Research Gate databases were utilized to collect empirical research articles. These empirical articles were used to find information on how women are portrayed in comic books and how these portrayals affect society. To be included as a part of the current, relevant research, articles must be less than 10 years old to validate the current study for problem of practice, and the studies must be peer-reviewed, empirical journal articles for quality purposes. Key search items on Japanese manga, comic strips, and indie comics are excluded from this study to concentrate on influential comic output and its influence on American societal culture.



RESULTS AND EVIDENCE TABLES

Thirteen peer-reviewed, empirical articles were returned from literature searches to answer the question, “How has the lack of realistic presentation of female characters in comics influenced and shaped societal expectations of women?” These articles were published between 2015 and 2024. Seven of these articles were quantitative, two of them were qualitative, and one of them was both a quantitative and qualitative study. This selection of ten articles focused on comparing comic book character proportions with real life people, analyzing narrative and character dynamics, and real-life influence, including market sales, target audience, and transmedia traction. Two of the returned articles (Vleet et al., 2023; Shawcroft & Coyne, 2022) were not included in the results, but studied for a broader understanding of the problem.

Evidence Tables

Table 1: These studies help answer the research question by providing statistics and data of the (if at all) present amount of sexual objectification and/or violence against women in comic books and how/why it occurs.

RQ: How has the lack of realistic presentation of female characters in comics influenced and shaped societal expectations of women?

Sexual Objectification and Violence

1. Author(s) & (year)	2. Sample & Location (Who; where; how many, etc.) Be Specific!	3. List the Research Question(s) that help answer YOUR RQ. AND Briefly explain the intervention or independent variable, if applicable. What did the researchers "do?"	4. How was the data collected & analyzed to answer the RQ?	5. How was RQ answered? (What was the answer?) Only include relevant results that help answer your RQ Quantitative: What was the dependent variable & findings? *Explain using percentage change if available. If qualitative: What themes did the researcher(s) identify to answer the RQ?	6. Comments/Limitations
Burch & Johnsen (2020)	17,707 characters were analyzed from a total of 3,752 Marvel comics. 323 Marvel comic book panels were studied for measurements out of 463.	How realistic are comic book characters compared to real humans and how are they exaggerated? Independent variables include character BMIs, waist-to-hip ratios and shoulder-to-waist ratios.	Comic panels were singled into clear body visibility for measuring. From there, the comic characters BMI, Shoulder-waist ratio (SWR), and waist-hip-ratio (WHR) were measured and compared to real humans and comic film characters.	Although both male and female character measurements were greatly exaggerated, male character sizes varied 3 times more than female characters, even though there were considerably less female characters. Where the average number of underweight BMI in CDC's real men over 20 was .9% to comic men at 2.2%, real women over 20 was at 2.9% and comic women were at 23.7%.	Aesthetic limitations placed on female comic characters reflected the audience and artist preference. Even though physical limitations are absent/flexible due to superhuman abilities, female characters weren't found muscular in shape. Future studies include the comparison between body appearance and super abilities.
Burch & Widman (2023)	1,765 DC Comic characters were analyzed and measured.	How do the designed bodies of comic book women compare statistically to average women and porn stars?	The Height and weight of each comic book character was sourced and recorded using DC's official character listing (DCComics.com) and BMI was measured from comic panels by hand.	In the comparison study, the average waist to hip ratio (WHR) in average women was .88%, .68% in female Pornhub stars, and .62% in female Marvel characters. These numbers reflected that female comic characters were significantly more exaggerated than male characters.	DC women had much smaller waists in comparison to Marvel women. These female characters were designed with curves more exaggerated than porn stars to appeal to male audiences.
Burch & Widman (2024)	525 characters split into DC (110 female and 183 male) and Marvel (124 female and 142 male) characters.	Do comic book women have longer legs than comic book men and how often are they wearing heels or standing on tip-toe?	Images of characters with exposed legs were sourced from official Marvel and DC character indexes.	Results showed that both Marvel and DC women had longer legs than male characters. DC women wore more heels than Marvel women, but only 23% of female characters were shown with their feet flat on the ground ("flat-footed").	Longer legs were drawn on female characters to appeal sexier along with heeled footwear or tip-toe bare feet. This was a design choice by an artist. Implications were made that this hyper- sexualization may

Table 2: These studies help answer the research question by exploring if or how comics influence culture and society through audiences and transmedia platforms.**RQ: How has the lack of realistic presentation of female characters in comics influenced and shaped societal expectations of women?****Audience and Transmedia Influence**

1. Author(s) & (year)	2. Sample & Location (Who; where; how many, etc.) Be Specific!	3. List the Research Question(s) that help answer YOUR RQ. AND Briefly explain the intervention or independent variable, if applicable. What did the researchers “do?”	4. How was the data collected & analyzed to answer the RQ?	5. How was RQ answered? (What was the answer?) Only include relevant results that help answer your RQ Quantitative: What was the dependent variable & findings? *Explain using percentage change if available. If qualitative: What themes did the researcher(s) identify to answer the RQ?	6. Comments/Limitations
Addis & Troilo (2016)	163 of “The Ultimate Spider-Man” series comic book issues and their market standing (published between Sep 2000-Dec 2011) and interviews of experts.	Does the humanizing of comic book characters affect market sales? Independent variable(s): Hero’s physical appearance, abilities, social conditions, and narrative. Marketing policies.	Issues were controlled from a specific series and broken up into market policy categories including price, film, reboots, and specials. The issues were also analyzed to determine the scale of humanization by recording aspects like death, family, and appearance.	Interviews with experts revealed that the variables related to humanization (independent) have little effect on sales while marketing confirms that it can have a negative effect. Results suggest that consumers prefer to read unrealistic narratives as an escape or daydream.	Limitations and other factors include comic artistic skill preference by consumers versus marketing as a product for sale. Comic book succession and studies are complex because of the freedom of artistic expression and creativity against the business of sales, preference, and marketing.
Burch & Widman (2023)	3,752 Marvel Comics (including data collected from previous Burch and Johnsen (2020) study) compared to 7,000 DC Comic Characters excluding children, TV characters, and film.	What audience are supernormal stimuli comic characters created for and what kind of reactions do they trigger? Independent variables include height, weight, and BMI measurements.	Data was collected from various sources including analyzing direct comic panels. Character height and weight were sourced from DC’s official character encyclopedia and “DC Comics: The Ultimate Character Guide” Snider (2011).	Comic book male and female characters are designed to cater to male audiences and their sexual preferences. Only 28% of the characters were female. Male comic characters are less exaggerated than females in comparison to real life, but they are designed with male desires of showing strength and dominance.	Future studies and limitations included studying how artists assigned different super powers to different characters based on their sex.
Murphy (2016)	68 Marvel comic titles and 788 books were analyzed in decades from 1960-2014.	How has popular culture treated and portrayed women in Marvel comics from 1960 to 2014? Independent variables included The Bechdel Test,	Each comic issue was scored into 7 different categories to be analyzed. These categories include The Bechdel Test, cover art, occupation,	Female occupations were shown to have a steady increase from 1960 to 1990. A strong decrease occurred in 1990 to 2009 presumably caused by cultural backlash. Bechdel Test results increased from 1960-2014 with a noticeable dip from	Comics have been shown to reflect societal and cultural standards of the time. Women are often subjects of marginalization in real American culture as they are in Marvel comic books consistently throughout the 1960s-2000s.

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		female sexualization, and occupation.	narrative, and violence against women, and sexualization.	1990-1999. Balance of power has consistently increased from 1960-2014.	
Pennell & Behm-Morawitz (2015)	82 female undergraduates from a large U. S. Midwestern university.	What are the short-term effects on women that are exposed to hypersexualization of female characters in comic book-based films?	Participants were randomly exposed to different film clips showing one of the following: sexualized heroine, sexualized victim, or no stimuli as a control group.	The short-term effects for this study included low self esteem and low egalitarian gender role beliefs after being exposed to sexualized female characters in comic book films. Potential positive results showed an interest in body competence for women.	Potential limitations include showing shorter film excerpts to participants instead of the whole comic book superhero movie. Implications: Superhero comic book movies rely on sexualizing women as victims and as contrasting heroines. Narratives like film and comic books are a vessel that portray specific beliefs and expectations onto society while in turn being affected by society.
Poon (2022)	Qualitative interview participants: 156 individuals from ages 18-28 with 63 females and 93 males.	How do modernisation and cultural shifts influence comic design and characterisation? How does mainstreaming of comics enhance its popularity and propel the industry's growth?	Sequential mixed methods of qualitative surveys and quantitative research were used. Surveys and interviews were conducted.	Comic books reflect current social issues and cultural expectations. Comics have also been used to change society and spread a specific message or intent.	Limitations include the potential conservative attitude towards initiating societal change through comic storytelling. Because comics are often subjects of trans-media trends, societal change or commentary would spread further using commercialism.
Simmons (2015)	70 graphic novels were sourced from YASLA's "Top Ten Graphic Novels for Teens" between 2007 and 2013.	What percentage of young adult graphic novels found on the YALSA "Top Ten Great Graphic Novels for Teens" has one or more female main characters? Has this percentage changed over time? Independent variables include the gender of the main character.	Graphic novels were analyzed to identify the gender of the main character and compiled into a percentage to answer the RQ.	The gender percentage of the main characters in the sample of YA graphic novels from 2007-2013 resulted as 48% only male, 24% only female, and 22% both male and female.	Roughly half the population is female at 50.9%, yet there are twice as many male main characters in YA graphic novels. This may be a result of catering to a male audience or the biased design choices of male-gendered writers and artists.

DISCUSSION

The lack of equality and foundation of idealism in female comic book characters risks dehumanizing and objectifying women in society. The research question that incentivized this literature review was: *“How has the lack of realistic presentation of female characters in comics influenced and shaped societal expectations of women?”* Key evidence and findings from 10 articles, plus additional literature, were divided into two main research results: Sexual Objectification and Violence, and Audience and Transmedia Influence. These are the areas where the analyzed articles overlapped and produced consistent data.

Despite generalizing gaps and limitations within the empirical studies available, overlapping evidence suggests that the presence of hypersexualized women in comic books influences the expectation of women in real life through transmedia traction, male audience preference, and shifting cultural standards of women. This research study contributes to the growing body of research. This data implies that consistently designing female characters in a dehumanizing manner has the potential to develop into expectations of real women.

To explore hypothesized hypersexualization, researchers recorded physical measurements of female comic book characters' bodies; these measurements, Body Mass Index (BMI), Shoulder-Waist Ratio (SWR), leg length, and Waist-to-Hip Ratios (WHR), were calculated to compare to real women (Burch & Johnsen, 2020; Burch & Widman, 2023; Burch & Widman, 2024). According to BMI data of real people over the age of 20 versus comic book characters, the CDC's average number of underweight men, at 0.9%, was compared to Marvel's male comic book character BMI average of 2.9%. Meanwhile, the CDC's average number of underweight women was listed at 2.9%, compared to Marvel's female comic characters' underweight BMI average of 23.7% (Burch & Johnsen, 2020).

Marvel comic book characters' WHRs were compared with those of average women and female PornHub stars, which resulted in a noticeable difference with a ratio of .88% in average women, .68% in average female PornHub stars, and .62% in Marvel female characters (Burch & Widman, 2023). Marvel and DC female characters were shown to have longer legs than their male counterparts including only 23% of female characters being portrayed with no heels or tip-toe walking (Burch & Widman, 2024).

Statistical evidence suggests that female characters are purposefully designed to appear sexually pleasing to male audiences with more curves and smaller waists than porn stars (Burch & Widman, 2023). Concerns and implications of these hypersexualized and exaggerated female body types include risking endangerment of self-image and influencing potential partner expectations of women (Burch & Widman, 2024). Limitations are placed on comic female body types in comparison to male characters, with male character body types varying three times as much as female characters, implying that comic women are objectified by design (Burch & Johnsen, 2020).

DC's *Wonder Woman* character was specifically designed to break free from the overused "damsel in distress" stereotype imposed on female characters by giving her a commanding presence, physical strength, and her own narrative. Despite this intention, she was physically designed with a sense of conventional beauty, including large breasts and long, bare legs (Guimarães et al., 2024). These analyses suggest a consistent pattern among female comic book character design that women cannot appear muscled or deviate from male beauty preferences, even when they are fighting crime (Burch & Johnsen, 2020; Guimarães et al., 2024).

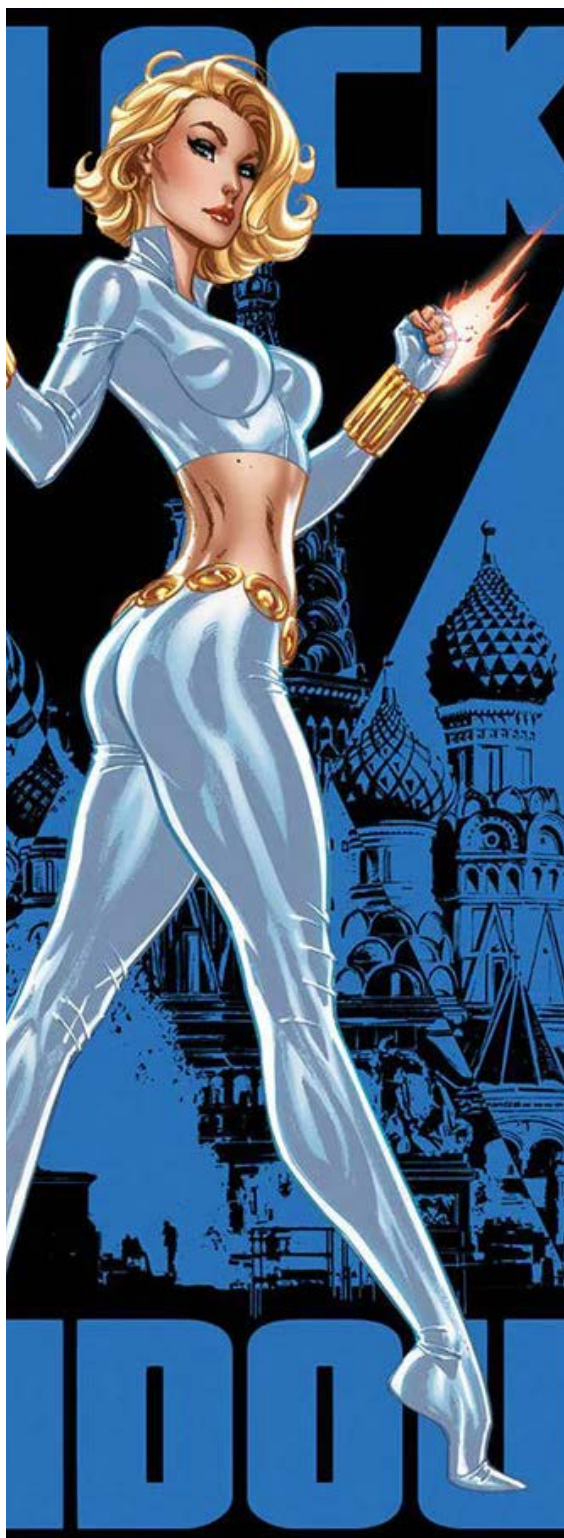


Figure 4. Black Widow Marvel comic book cover. Reprinted from J Scott Campbell, by J. S. Campbell, 2020, Retrieved from <https://jscottcampbell.com/products/black-widow-2-j-scott-campbell-a-trade-dress?srltid=AfmBOoouuXukxINoZ7OExLe-wr19V3JjUykSeNrIta2w93NAz7pd3irc>. Copyright 2020 by J Scott Campbell.

Figure 5. Spider-Gwen: Smash cover. Reprinted from Marvel, by D. Nakayama, 2023, Retrieved from https://www.marvel.com/comics/issue/112882/spider-gwen_smash_2023_1. Copyright 2023 by Marvel.

Violence against women in comics has been documented to be unchanged between 1960 and 2014, even under the strict censorship regulations of the Comic Book Code Authority jurisdiction from 1954 to 2005. Female comic characters were presented as hypersexualized, objectified, and consistently victimized under violent crimes from 1960 to 2016 (Murphy, 2016). Themes of benevolent sexism and rape victim blaming against women are present in comics from 1991 to 2005, including evidence showing that 85% of total comic characters are male in this timeline (Facciani et al., 2015), suggesting that violence against women appears often across comic book narratives despite the significantly inferior female character count. Male bias among influential comic book artists seems to be prevalent in young adult graphic novels as well, with evidence showing that the percentage of male main characters from 2007-2013 was 48% and female main characters at 24%, and the remaining 22% for equal protagonistic roles (Simmons, 2015).

Throughout this literature review, the findings and evidence transitioned from how women are depicted in comic books to transmedia and real-world influence with interviews and market sales analyses. Hypersexualization often followed the female characters from the comic book pages to other forms of media. Comic book characters often make their way into film and television. A small sample of volunteer undergraduate women was exposed to random clips of comic-based female characters in superhero movies in order for researchers to document their short-term, initial reactions.

The results showed a positive correlation with interest in body competence, but also included lower self-esteem and lower egalitarian gender role beliefs (Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015).

Target comic book audiences, primarily male, seem disinterested in realistic narratives and worldly humanistic expression and prefer to consume exaggerated characters like dominant men and hypersexualized women (Addis & Troilo, 2016; Burch & Widman, 2023). Interviews with comic book marketing experts revealed that humanizing factors, like appearance and vulnerability, have little influence on comic book sales. Consequently, comic titles with a focus on humanization reflect a negative impact on market sales (Addis & Troilo, 2016).

Comic books reflect the beliefs, desires, and cultural standards in the real world. Female comic book characters are subject to marginalization and expectations in comic books just as women are in the real world (Murphy, 2016). In Murphy's analysis of Marvel comic books between 1960 and 2014, female occupation and agency steadily increased from 1960 before crashing in 1990 as a reflection of cultural backlash against the narrative (Murphy, 2016). This suggests that comic narrative influences society as society influences comic book narratives. As comic books reflect the real world, they also deliver intentional messages and spread further through transmedia trends, bringing change to culture through commercialism (Poon, 2022).

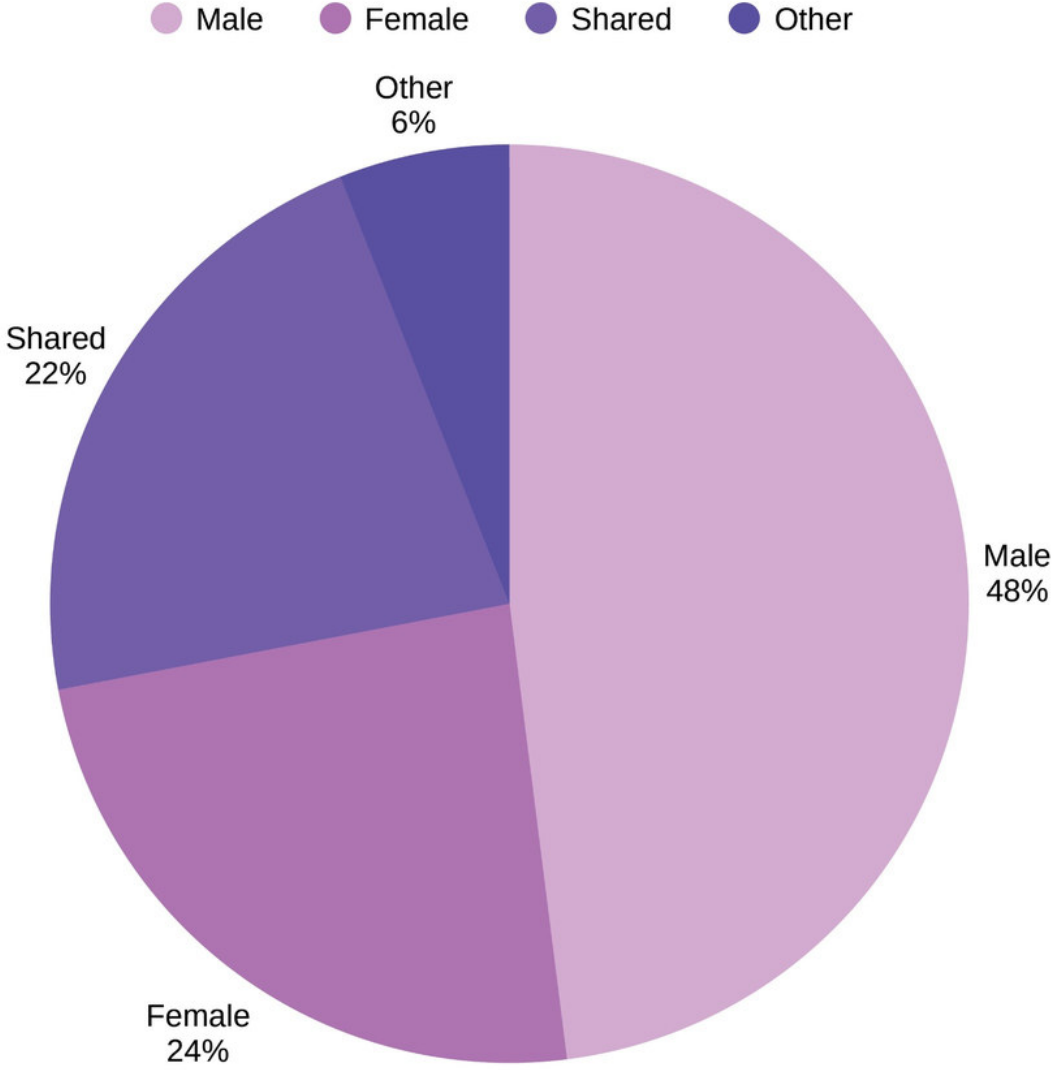
Besides this interpretation of the data, there are limitations that need to be addressed. These limitations include smaller qualitative interviewee sample sizes, comic studio-specific analysis, and limited market sale samples. Most of these studies mentioned that the power of change and character design came from the artists, but failed to mention specific names. This subject of research is significantly limited and should be expanded upon. Further investigational research is encouraged to shed light on the interesting relationship between comic book creators and comic book consumers in terms of symbiotic influence.

Future research would include exploring the transmedia developments of comic books, especially films, as well as an extended study on comic book consumer preferences on character design. Other aspects, such as comic book artists and their character design decisions, also need to be analyzed. A qualitative action research study is encouraged in order to understand the following questions: *How much decision-making power do comic book artists have in female character design, and are they directly influenced by consumer preferences? Do comic book artists express artistic freedom through character design? Do specific comic book artists have influence over their audiences?*

LITERATURE REVIEW CONCLUSION

The hypersexualized design choices of female comic book characters can affect women in real life; the consequences of female dehumanization can result in societal objectification of women, poor body image, and decreased feelings of security and bodily autonomy. Different branches of evidence reveal complex and controversial results. When it came to analyzing the treatment of women in comics, all studies overlapped, resulting in overwhelming recognition of the problem of female dehumanization. Indeed, there were strong quantitative analyses of the volume of female bodily exaggeration. Interestingly, evidence suggested that comic books influence societal expectations or, contradictory to the former, that society influenced the design of comic books.

This problem of practice requires extensive future research in order to bring a cohesive answer to the research question, *“How has the lack of realistic presentation of female characters in comics influenced and shaped societal expectations of women?”* The necessary amount of studies is multifaceted and essential to learn and understand this problem. Fortunately, more people are becoming aware of the issue. Future research is paramount in order to encourage creators and consumers to portray female characters as male characters are portrayed: with human-centered qualities, variance, respect, and inspiring narratives.



"The active roles of the protector are masculinized, having strength and power as the foundation of masculinity; therefore, femininity is seen as vulnerable and weak.

Consequently, superheroes are men because men are understood as protectors in our culture and women more often appear as victims."

-Pennell & Behm-Morawitz (2015)

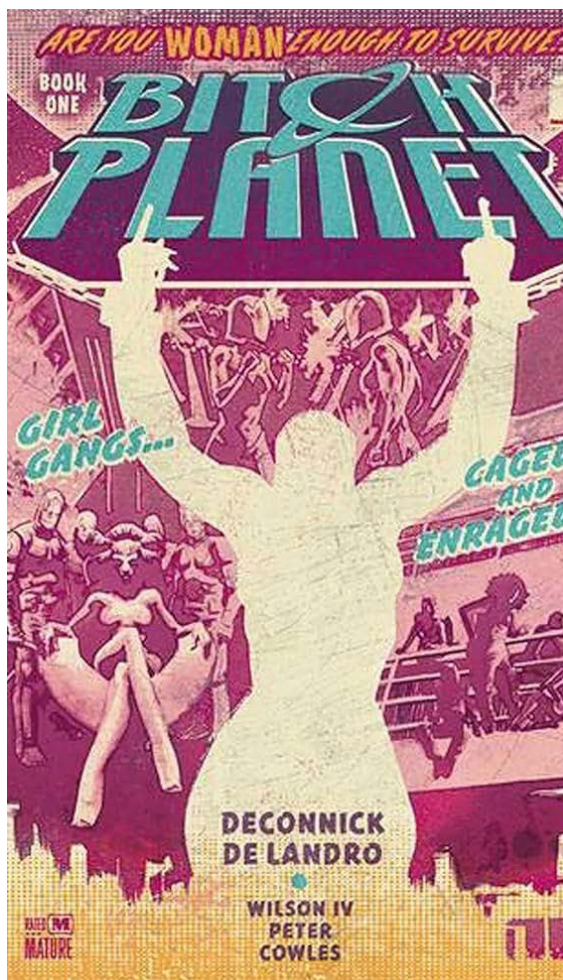


Figure 6. Bitch Planet comic book cover. Reprinted from Image Comics, by V. D. Landro & K. S. DeConnick, 2014, Retrieved from <https://imagecomics.com/comics/series/bitch-planet>. Copyright 2014 by Image Comics.

Figure 7. Lumberjanes comic book cover. Reprinted from Penguin Random House, by S. Watters, N.D. Stevenson, G. Allen, & G. Ellis, 2016, Retrieved from <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/806462/lumberjanes-vol-3-by-shannon-watters/>. Copyright 2016 by BOOM!Box.

Figure 8. Handmaid's Tale Graphic Novel page 18. Reprinted from Penguin Random House, by M. Atwood & R. Nault, 2018, Retrieved from <https://penguinrandomhouselibrary.com/book/?isbn=9780385539241>. Copyright 2018 by Nan A. Talese.



PRECEDENTS

There are great graphic novels in the world that represent women with agency today. Some of these tackle violence against women and give female characters a voice and strength. Three examples of fantastic stories are *Bitch Planet* by Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine De Landro, *Lumberjanes* by Shannon Watters, Grace Ellis, Gus Allen, and ND Stevenson, and *The Handmaid's Tale (Graphic Novel)*, Renee Nault's adaptation of Margaret Atwood's novel.

Bitch Planet is a graphic, powerful comic series that mirrors the violence against women today in a dystopian world. *The Handmaid's Tale* tells a similar story of dystopian oppression of women, with an eerie darkness and gorgeous artwork. The *Lumberjanes* series features friendship and female camaraderie with supernatural action and storytelling.

My graphic novel is different from these powerful stories. I wanted to focus on creating a science fiction action comic that depicts women as main characters with humanity, agency, and vulnerability. The way I portray my feminist characters is casual, as if depicting female roles in this way is normal. There is a calling for powerful, feminist messages and warnings against oppression. However, my story shows women as people in a society that shares an equal role with men. I wanted my story to show a feminist depiction in the action genre where women are people first in society.

THE SOLUTION

There are multiple solutions to remedy this problem of practice. In the research field, I plan to contribute to the limited studies by conducting a quantitative research project. This project will consist of studying previously annotated female comic characters and connecting them to their creators. These studies were robust, but none of them mentioned specific perpetrators of creating objectifying female comic characters by name. My goal is to construct a foundation of accountability from culture-sculpting comic book creators.

Another study I plan to execute is a large scale qualitative study focused on women's opinions and reactions to these transmedian female comic character designs. The goal is to pool more data in order to facilitate a proper understanding of women's views and opinions on comic book designs. As a creator myself, I plan to publish a graphic novel that focuses on putting women forward as people with agency. There are very limited numbers of action stories that empower women, so I want to put my own out into the world and let people experience how women should be portrayed in action-packed storytelling.

"...too many effects can simply ruin good artwork.

Nowhere is this more noticeable than on the skin tones on female characters. Over-rendered female faces very often will look harsh and manly."

- Mark Chiarello & Todd Klein



Figure 9. DC Comic's advice on rendering women's faces. Reprinted from The DC Comics Guide to Coloring and Lettering Comics (29), by M. Chiarello & T. Klein, 2004, Watson-Guptill Publications. Copyright 2004 by DC Comics.

STARTING MY OWN STORY

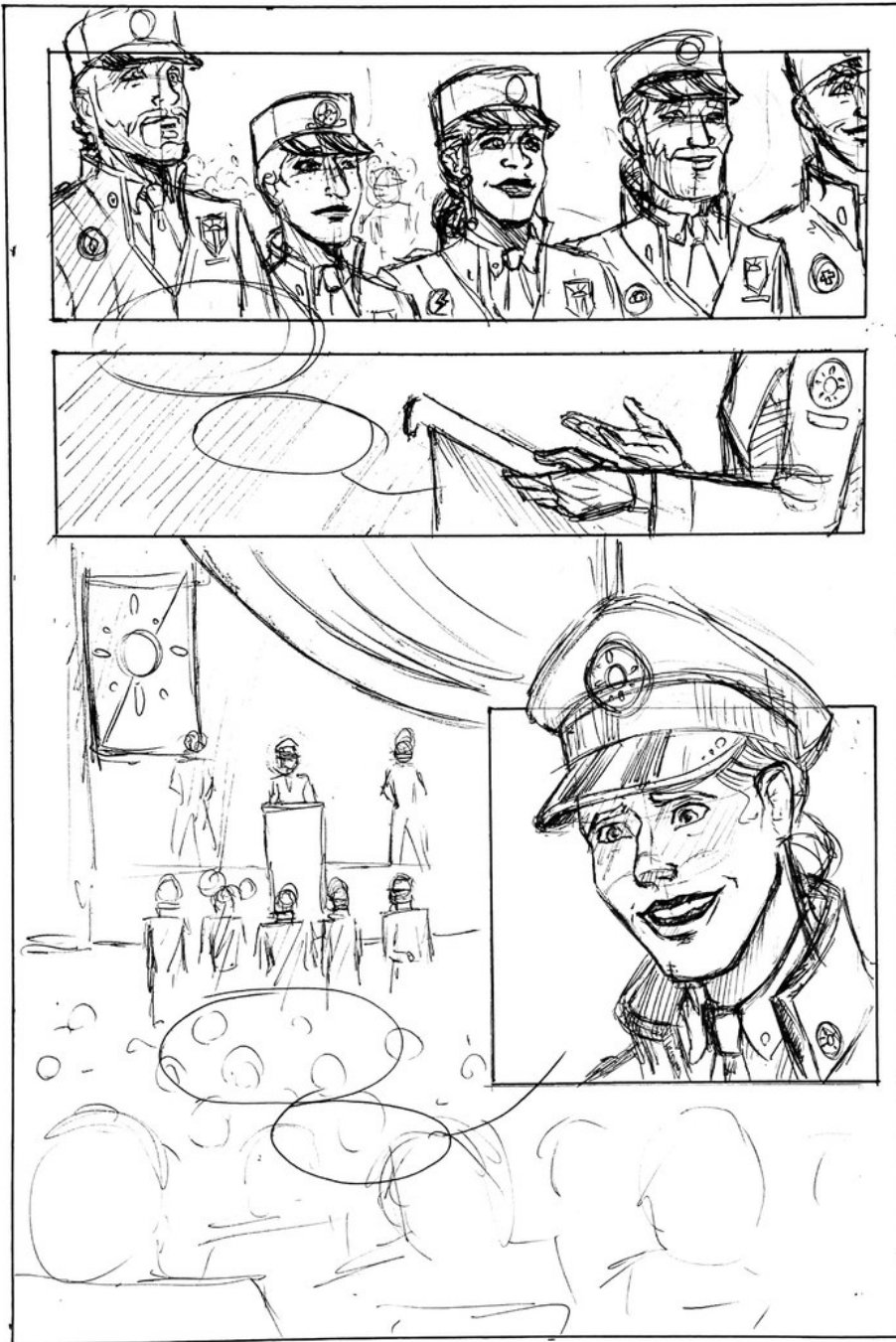
Before I started writing my graphic novel, I thought about what kind of story I wanted to read. I love a good adventure and action story, but I also like a touch of romance to raise the stakes. The biggest concept I wanted to emphasize, besides giving women agency, was the aspect of humanism. What do I mean by humanism? I wanted my characters to be daring, brave, and exciting, but I also wanted them to be tangible and relatable in a vulnerable way. Oftentimes, action stories tend to negate heavy consequences to decisions or meaningful casualty numbers. Powerful characters in media tend to have invulnerabilities and invincibilities as a subconscious design.

I wanted to portray characters with super powers, of course, but these characters would have real-circumstantial consequences to their powers. Fire-wielding people would need fireproof clothing, and people with supersonic flight would break their necks at such speeds and suffocate at high altitudes without armor or neck braces. In a post-war society where super powers are possessed by everyone, flying individuals would need flight licenses and catch-and-rescue-training to rescue falling people without snapping them in half.

In short, real powers come in contact with real physics, chemistry, and humanitarian society. Aside from the logistics of humans with superpowers, humanism also means giving characters emotional complexities. Along with giving women strength in storytelling, I wanted to give men vulnerability. There are male characters in my story that have apparent masculine design, but they have emotions and handle them in a healthy and human way.

In a physical way, characters are designed with real expressions, male and female. Characters are wounded according to actual combat aftermaths, and they carry these visible wounds throughout the story as they heal. Continuity in wounds and their physical side effects on a character shows weight and brings the audience closer to living their stories with them. We've all heard countless stories of all-powerful characters who destroy masses without a single cut, but what about powerful characters who carry broken ribs and lose battles?

3



STUDIO VERSUS INDIVIDUAL

Creating a comic or graphic novel is a lot of hard work. In a comic studio, there is typically a different role for each step of creating a comic. For example, the writer just focuses on writing the script, where another person is a penciler, another inks, and another is a colorist. The comic studio is like a beehive, everyone has their role to complete the monumental task of making a comic.

As a solo graphic novelist, I must be all of these professions all at once. Everything from writing the script to designing the layouts to rendering the pages is done by me. In comparison to making a movie, I have to be the director, the set designer, the lighting technician, the sound producer, the actors, the costume designer, the list goes on. The real challenge is creating a comic in a predictable, timely manner, but with as much quality as a multi-person studio. You could call me a masochist, but I love creating comics.

SOLAR SOLDIER: MY GRAPHIC NOVEL

"Solar Soldier" is my four part series that I wrote and illustrated completely by myself. Here is the overall series summary:

In the year 3051, Michelle Archer, a Sky Soldier veteran, creates a covert safe haven beneath two corrupt kingdoms. A militia, the Solar Soldiers, protects this secret place with their lives under Michelle's leadership. But when a paranoid queen threatens the annihilation of the discovered place of refuge, Michelle sets off on a mission to find the elusive and feared Cyborg Kingdom. Her desperation drives her on this quest to seek aid and boldly conquer both kingdoms at home to save her people.

This graphic novel series was designed to be colorful, dramatic, and action-packed. I wanted an action story with weight and decision-related consequences. It centers on giving a female protagonist agency and strong leadership. This story also gives male characters vulnerability.



THE SCRIPT

The script structure I use is loosely based on a screenplay for films. Each page of a script is equivalent to a comic page. I start with writing the story/scene out like a novel and make story edits before plugging it into a script. I split the section of a page into “panels” and note what’s occurring in each panel (frame), including dialogue and onomatopoeias. As I write the script, I simultaneously draft the panel thumbnails. Planning the panel contents in the script helps me visualize the physical sizes and order of the panel thumbnails.

SOLAR SOLDIER

Volume 1

Scene 5/11

PAGES 34-36

Rough Draft

"Reports For Queen Melanie"

34 PAGE 34: AN ESTABLISHING SHOT OF THE ORION PALACE AS DARK STORM CLOUDS ROLL IN. CONSTANCE TAKES HER SEAT NEXT TO THE QUEEN AS THE QUEEN NOTICES HER SICKLY FACE.

Panel 1: The dark, looming storm clouds roll majestically over the palace. Looking up at the grand windows from outside the conference room, you can see light rain glowing near the warm light from the outside lanterns.

Panel 2: You can see the grand conference table from above at an angle as Constance walks over to her seat and officers wander.

Panel 3: From the shining silks of the queen's attire and well-manicured hands, you can see Constance behind her, slowly sitting down into the angular chair with noticeable queasiness.

QUEEN MELANIE: AH, THERE'S MY ROYAL ADVISOR.

CONSTANCE, YOU'RE ALMOST LATE!

CONSTANCE: MY APOLOGIES, QUEEN MELANIE.

Panel 4: Queen Melanie's crown glitters in the light from above and behind her as she places her hand on Constance's wrist. Constance grips the edge of her seat as the queen looks at her pale face with worry,

QUEEN MELANIE: YOU LOOK TERRIBLE, LIKE YOU'VE LOST YOUR LUNCH...AND BREAKFAST.

CONSTANCE: I'M AFRAID I DID, YOUR MAJESTY.

Panel 5: From below the raised seats, you can see Queen Melanie flailing her arms expressively as she scoffs in disgust.

QUEEN MELANIE: I'LL BET IT'S BECAUSE OF THOSE NASTY PESTS YOU RAN INTO THIS MORNING! POOR THING!

CONSTANCE: YES, QUITE SO, MY QUEEN.

Panel 6: Looking at the profile of the queen, you can see light from the storms bounce off her face and crown as her eyes glow green. She leans into her hand as her fingers flick with electricity.

QUEEN MELANIE: THOSE RATS DON'T DESERVE TO SEE THE LIGHT OF DAY...AND SOME DAY, THEY'LL BE AS DEAD AS THE FLOOR I STAND UPON.

35 PAGE 35: THE CONFERENCE MEETING BEGINS AS THE OFFICERS TAKE THEIR SEATS. QUEEN MELANIE CALLS ON THE SEA OFFICER TO REPORT THEIR FINDINGS FIRST.

Panel 1: From the end of the conference table, you can see the queen raising her chin as she calls the meeting. The other Jupiters sit up in attention.

QUEEN MELANIE: WELCOME, JUPITER OFFICERS, TO THIS MONTH'S REPORT CONFERENCE. SINCE YOU ALL ARE THE HIGHEST RANKING MEMBERS OF YOUR DEPARTMENTS, I BETTER SEE SOME IMPROVEMENTS AMONG YOUR MILITIAS...

Panel 2: You can see the Queen waving her hand in the light through the palace guards' heads along the back wall.

QUEEN MELANIE: ...ESPECIALLY SINCE THESE ANGSTY SOLAR SOLDIERS HAVE BEEN PRESSING PINS INTO MY SIDES. SEA JUPITER HAWKING, YOU MAY START US OFF.

Panel 3: The Sea Jupiter Officer nervously folds her gloved hands together in front of her.

JUPITER HAWKING: AHM, OUR NEWEST PLUTO SOLDIERS THIS SEASON SET A NEW RECORD IN WATER SPINNING AND DIVING SPEEDS, YOUR MAJESTY.

Panel 4: Queen Melanie, bored, looks over at Comet impatiently. You can see Constance watching the queen.

QUEEN MELANIE: UGH, OKAY I CAN'T WAIT ANY LONGER. SKY JUPITER COMET, WHERE ARE YOU ON THE SOLAR SOLDIER TRACKING MISSION?

Panel 5: Comet sits forward and smirks as she compliments the queen on her dress.

COMET: VERY WELL, QUEEN MELANIE. AND BEFORE I BEGIN, MAY I COMPLIMENT YOU ON THAT ABSOLUTELY RADIANT DRESS?

Panel 6: Queen Melanie's crown glitters as she smooths her dress out, giggling. Constance rolls her eyes and purses her lips in annoyance.

QUEEN MELANIE: OH! THANK YOU, IT'S BRAND NEW! NOW HURRY UP BEFORE I LOSE MY PATIENCE.

36 PAGE 36: COMET SHARES THAT SHE AND THE JUSTICE OFFICER CAN FIND THE EXACT LOCATION OF THE SOLAR SOLDIERS, MUCH TO THE QUEEN'S DELIGHT.

Panel 1: A close up on Comet's face as she smugly reveals her findings.

COMET: WE THINK WE FOUND WHERE THE SOLAR SOLDIER HIDEOUT IS.

Panel 2: From past Comet's gloves you can see the queen's eyes grow angry in judgement.

QUEEN MELANIE: OH, YOU *THINK* YOU KNOW? DON'T WASTE MY TIME. HAVE YOU FOUND THE EXACT LOCATION?

COMET: NOT YET, YOUR HIGHNESS, BUT JUSTICE JUPITER
DUBOIS AND I DETECTED AND COLLECTED ORGANIZED TREMORS
INTO A CONSISTENT MAP...

*Panel 3: Comet opens the table into a holographic map
showing little red blips where the tremors are in a
grid-like pattern. The other officers watch in amazement as
she motions and points.*

COMET: IT'S ALMOST LIKE IT'S-

*Panel 4: Queen Melanie leans forward in her seat with
amazement and revelation.*

QUEEN MELANIE: ...AN UNDERGROUND SUBWAY.

*Panel 5: From the profile of the Justice Jupiter standing
over the map, you can see Comet watching the queen.*

DUBOIS: ALL THE DOTS SEEM TO CLOT SOMEWHERE UNDER THE
SOUTH VALLEY. WE COULD TRACE THE EXACT LOCATION,
ASSUMING IT IS A SUBWAY SYSTEM.

QUEEN MELANIE: HOW LONG WOULD THAT TAKE?

COMET: NO LONGER THAN A MONTH, YOUR MAJESTY.

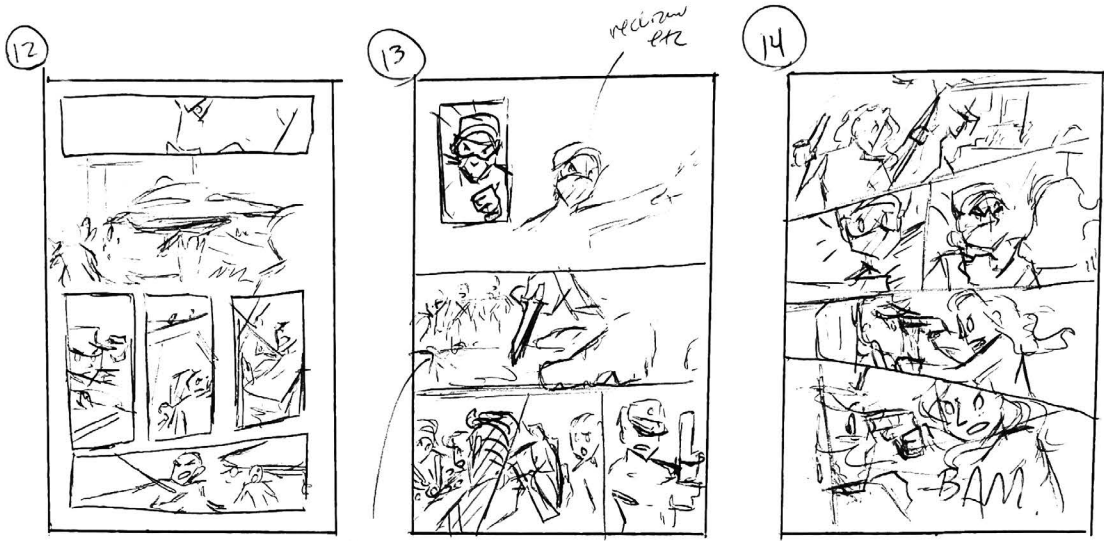
*Panel 6: Queen Melanie sits back into her seat and cocks
her head hauntingly in the shadow of the light behind her
as the red from the dots reflect onto her cheeks.
Constance, terrified, watches the queen carefully.*

QUEEN MELANIE: EXCELLENT.

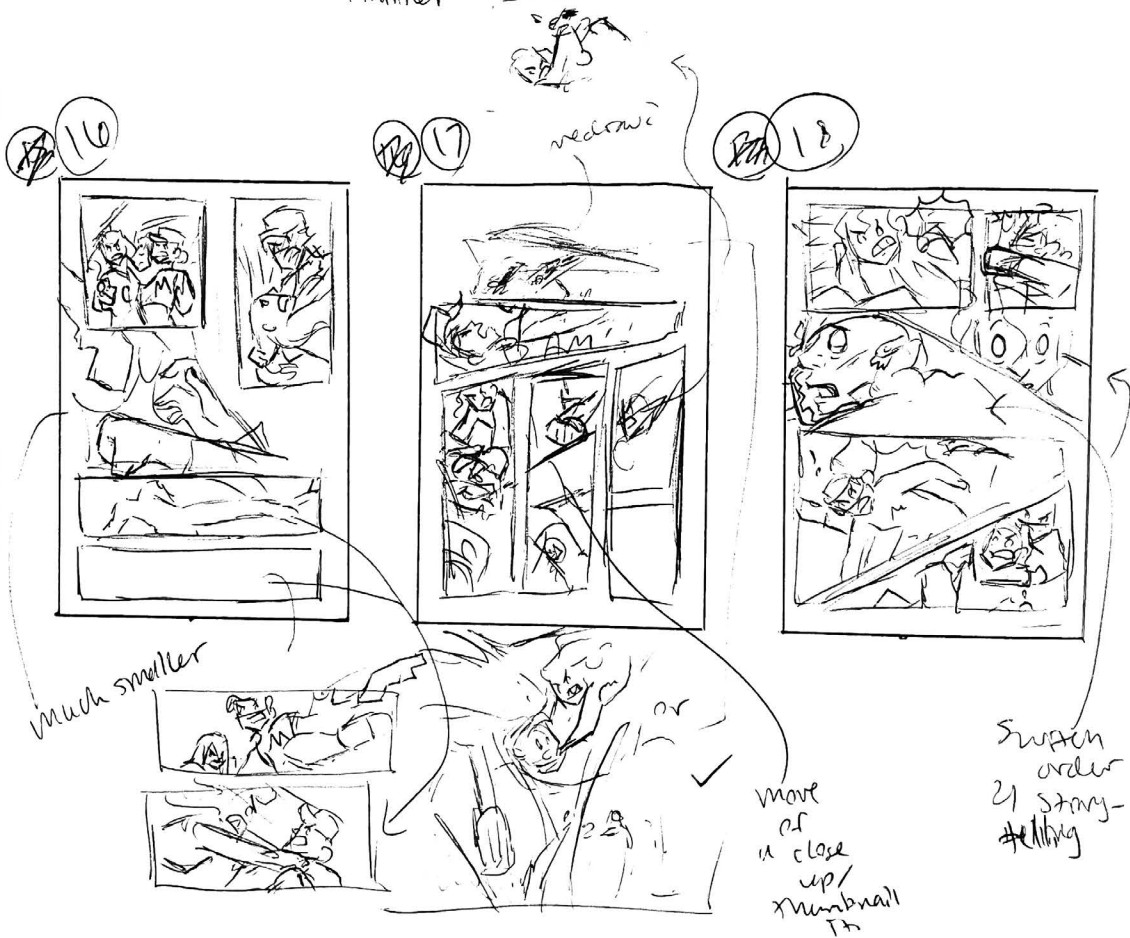
THUMBNAILS

As mentioned previously, I draft the panel thumbnails as I write the script since the ideas and images are fresh in my head. These help me determine where the panels will go and how they will create eye flow. I also draw simple figures and shapes in each panel to get an idea of what the final page composition will be like. As I plan, I leave space around each panel thumbnail so I can change ideas as I go.

Sometimes a design (for a weapon, as an example) is fresh in my head, so I sketch it out on the thumbnail page so I won't forget it. All of the thumbnails I create are a smaller scale of the actual finished page to create size and composition, aspect ratio, and continuity. The script and thumbnail process was an original result of multiple experiments to save time. I found that doing both of these both together saved me hours of work, which is always a main goal when creating sequential media.



inner



Chester



Michelle



Vol.1 Scene 1 "Solar Soldier Oath —



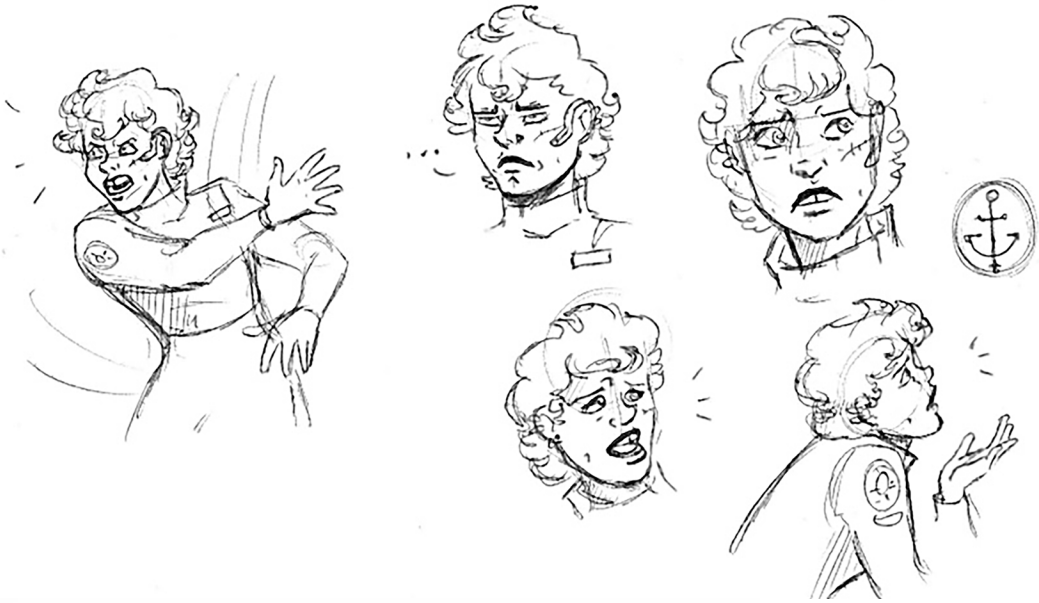
CHARACTER DESIGN

Human touch is a very important aspect for me to convey when it comes to making comics and graphic novels. From rendering styles to expressive character faces, the goal is to connect with the audience: humans. Giving characters expressions is a crucial part of adding humanism to comics and graphic novels. Meaningful and clear expressions make a story more relatable and emotionally moving. For example, if your character won a billion dollars, their face and body language need to convey sheer excitement so the reader feels it too. Or imagine a grief-stricken character whose loved one died in their arms with an indifferent expression and casual body language. It wouldn't have the impact that was intended to occur.

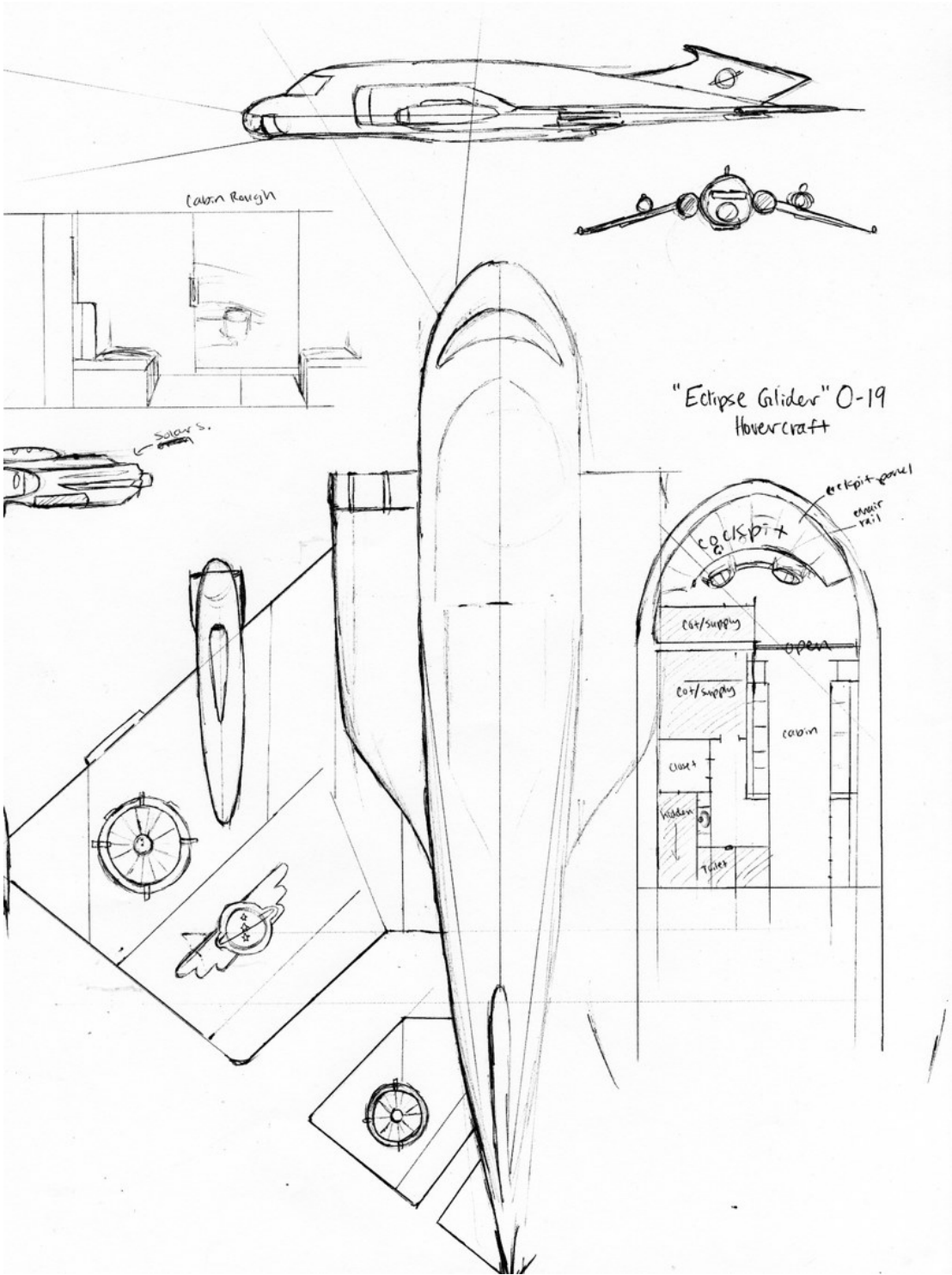
I prioritize intensity and personality in my character's facial expressions. Creating expressive facial lines for characters of all people is important in order to show the authenticity and humanity of a character. As a creator who comes from a figure drawing studio background, producing a human-like relatability means drawing characters that move and physically behave like real people. Instead of overextended poses, for example, I try to convey my super-human characters like real people so the reader can find humanity and imperfection in them. When it comes to designing characters with superpowers, I focus on showing physical fatigue and bodily consequences to inflicted damage versus default invincibility. Invincibility can be boring and seemingly inauthentic, especially if it applies to all characters with superpowers.

When I was studying figure drawing in my undergraduate years, I was taught that giving women, specifically, expressive lines and wrinkles makes her look haggard or too masculine. I was formally taught to censor these lines on a woman's face to make her look more pleasing. Since then, I've made an effort to design female characters with "unconventional" expressions to make them who they are: humans. I do the same for male and nonbinary characters as well. Good, soulful expressions take the story farther every single time.

During my comic-making process, if a character has more than one line on a page, they get an expression sheet regardless of their importance. Expression sheets consist of drawing multiple different expressions of one character and sides to the face. They are also drawn with a full body study, focusing on shape and clothing. If a character wears something different, they are drawn again. This may sound like a tedious waste of time, but I assure you that it is essential to create character continuity. This also helps me get more comfortable with drawing a character over and over again. When I'm finished drafting a character sheet, I rip it out of my drawing pad and pin it to a visible wall next to my work station. As I draft a comic page, my head bobs like a bird as my eyes dart from the reference page to my drawing. Time saved, and continuity established.



Queen Melanie



VISUAL RESEARCH

When it comes to aspects like world building and combat, for example, research is a crucial task to making your comic believable. Research can help you fill in the gaps of your knowledge in order to help design and create any aspects of your story. For example, I had the task of designing an original hovercraft plane for my sci-fi-action comic. Without any research or references, my designs looked inadequate compared to the level of my characters or buildings. So to remedy this, I went to a library and checked out as many books as I could about fighter jets, planes, engines, and sci-fi conceptual designs. I researched how the crafts work and what designs would aerodynamically be believable. This may sound lethargic, but it was necessary for me to understand how to design and draw the vehicle over and over again.

If I wasn't sure how to draw hand-to-hand combat, I researched it. Sometimes, I took a basic class in Krav Maga or Brazilian Jiu Jitsu to understand effective fighting techniques in order to draw them. In short, if I didn't know how to draw something, I figured it out through references, photos, and research instead of winging it.

PAGE ROUGHS

After writing my script, designing page layouts, characters, and research, I create an actual size page rough. All the drafting I do is by hand. I personally feel more comfortable designing pages by hand, and I can do it quicker this way. Drafting by hand can also force me to work with what I have instead of relying on digital layers and erasing, which can take more time.

When I measure out a page, I take the thumbnail for that page, make a copy, cut it out, and paste it next to the large page for quick reference. I place my script next to me and pin up my character boards and mechanical designs for weapons and ships. This step is the last step to ensure everything fits in the right place. Drafting these pages at their actual size helps me understand how the reader will perceive the composition in their hands.

I only use three tools when I draw my page roughs: a paper pad, a ruler, and a ballpoint pen. I don't use a single pencil in the entire process of creating my graphic novel. It sounds crazy, but it's just another way to save time. When I used my pencil, I found myself erasing more than I was drawing, and that wasted a lot of my time. Ballpoint pens are cheap in bulk, draw as light as you would like, and they keep my work from smudging so they last longer for reference. Drawing with a ballpoint pen also forces me to work with my mistakes and just draw.

2

work
concept
details

reveal



Winnello...

The rookies
are ready...

sign

fix

fix

Close
up
hat in
foreground

click

COLORING

Color can visually make or break a graphic novel. It affects the mood, moves the story, sets the environment, and so much more. I like to stick to a specific color palette per page to unify the design and evoke the mood of the page. Color is a powerful tool to use for showing the emotion of the characters or urgency of the scene. A blazing red can be used to show panic or action, while a dull purple or green could exemplify loneliness or uneasiness. I use textured, digital tools to color and render my comic pages to save time and resources, and to ease the export process for later.

What colors you choose to use in a comic can set the stage for the characters, like the lighting and sets for actors in a movie. Choosing colors can also reflect your personal style as an illustrator. Personally, I tend to favor complementary and split complementary color schemes across my comic pages. Complementary colors are the colors directly opposite of each other on the color wheel; like red and green, for example. I find this scheme helps deliver my personal rendering style with dramatic, bold colors and soft, expressive colors to carry the story. As an illustrator, it can be challenging to choose the right hues in order to convey realism in your character's world. Making your world believable is important to keeping the viewer engaged, and it helps them immerse themselves in your world alongside the characters.

Understanding color is understanding color context to convey realism. Selective realism means to pick and choose how closely you want to follow a real-world-like quality. As the colorist, you have artistic liberties, but you must understand the rules of color (like color schemes, value, and intensity) before you can break them. When using selective realism in coloring, you have to remember one of the most important goals of sequential storytelling: clarity. Regardless of the color combinations and rendering, the viewer needs to be able to read and understand the scene clearly to follow the story. Sometimes this means dimming city lights behind a character in order to draw the focus to the character's moment in time.

Even if your studies or references protest such a choice for realism's sake, you have to do it for composition's sake. Sometimes I struggle with choosing my battles when it comes to color selective realism. My instinct is to capture the qualities of real life, but I have to prioritize color composition and clarity in order to succeed.

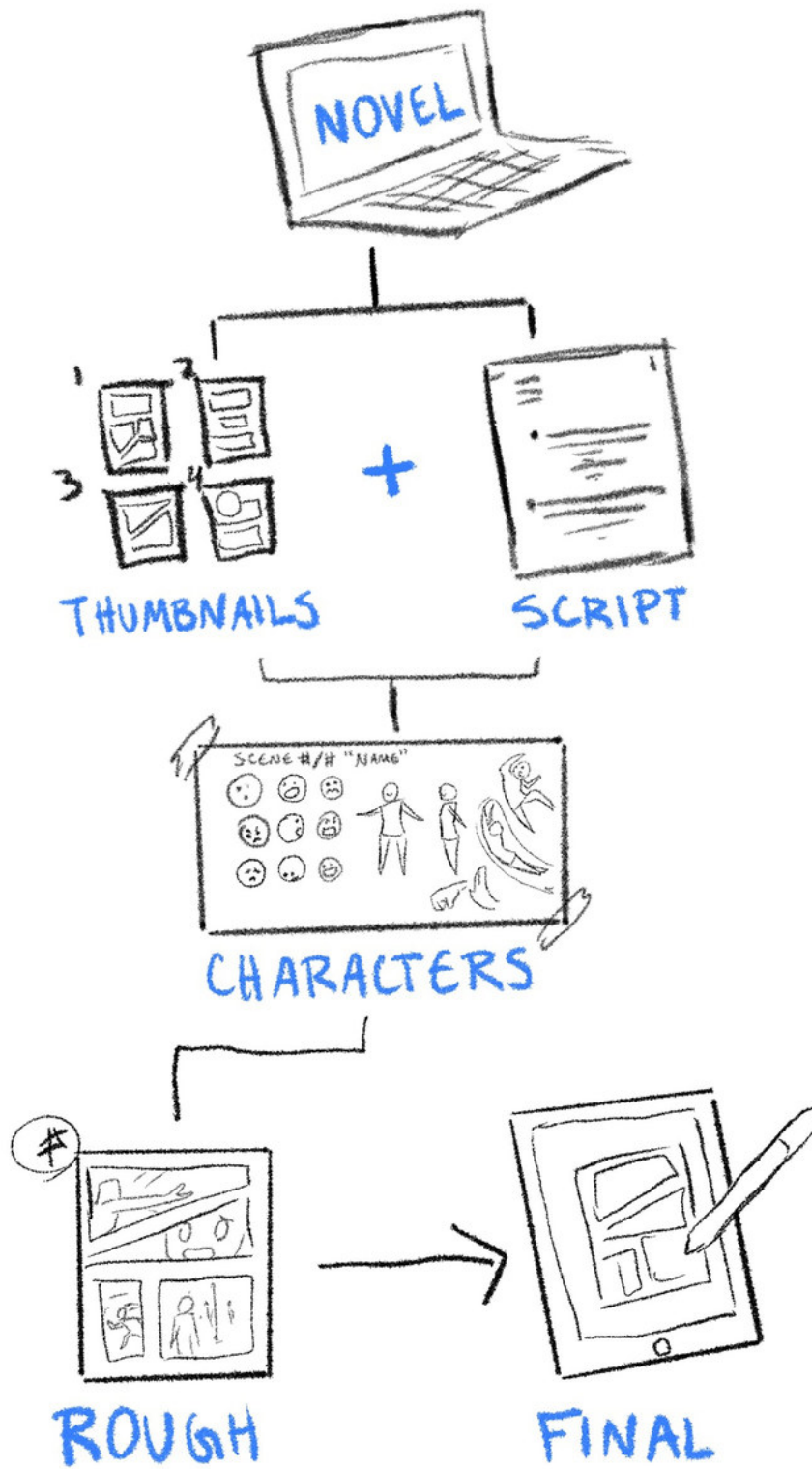
Knowing how to use traditional methods to color can help you when digitally coloring. As a studio-trained illustrator, knowing how to use paint and pastels has significantly influenced my digital coloring skills in the best way. Because of my previous knowledge, I understand how light and color interact to create depth and expressive scenes.

RENDERING STYLE

Finding a permanent rendering style was the hardest part of creating a graphic novel, believe it or not. My goal was to achieve a polished, professional, and easy-to-read style that could be achieved quickly to meet deadlines and create a larger body of work. I also wanted to focus on making my style expressive and pleasing to look at.

After researching other graphic novels, I found that many artists fall into two categories: one with clear, quick styles and the other with expressive, rendered styles. The clear, quick styles are looser, more reliable, and cleaner. They are dependable and easy to shell out numerous pages to get the story told. The clear styles are usually easy to follow or less interesting visually. The expressive, rendered styles are gorgeous and filled with eye-catching, heartfelt, and dramatic storytelling. They are, however, hard to read or follow. They're also very time consuming and often involve sometimes double the amount of planning progress. I wanted to try to find a happy medium between these two extremes. I wanted to create images with dynamic, expressive artwork in a way that is efficient and easy to read for the eye.

Unfortunately, this process was a lot of trial and error. Between rendering styles and word bubbles, experimentation was very difficult to find a sweet spot. Eventually, I settled into a good middle ground between smooth eye flow and dramatic storytelling with a time-saving bonus.















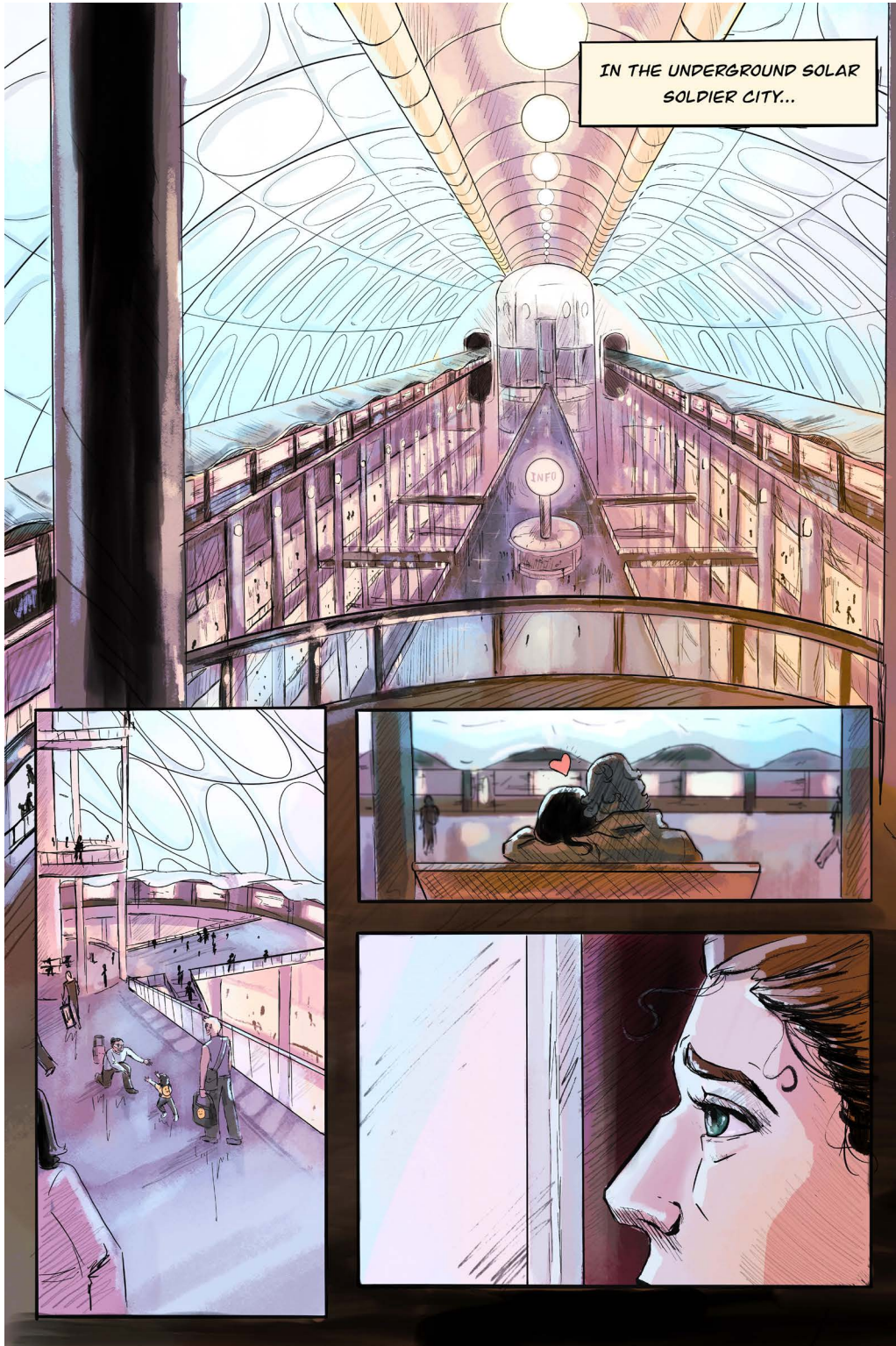


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- Renee Martin





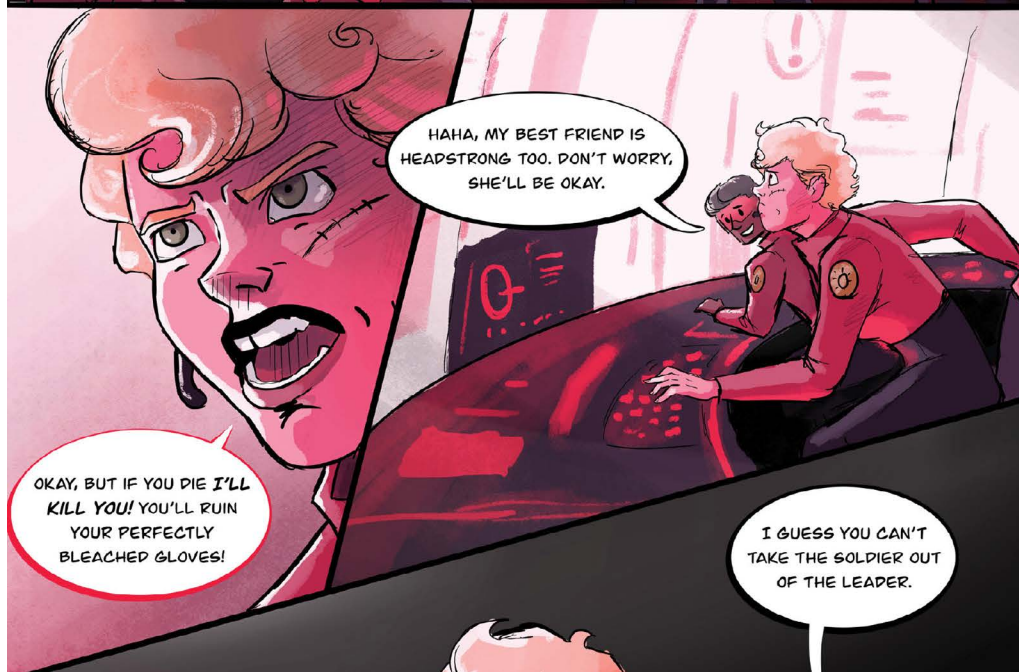
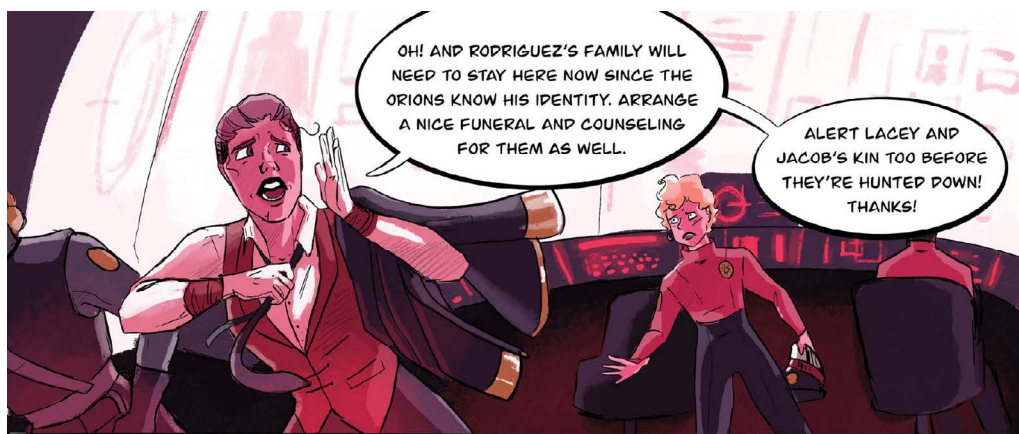


































"You'll notice the rendering style and coloring changes throughout these excerpts. Between these pages are mindful and systematic experimentations. My goal was to find a balance between clear eye flow and expressive rendering."

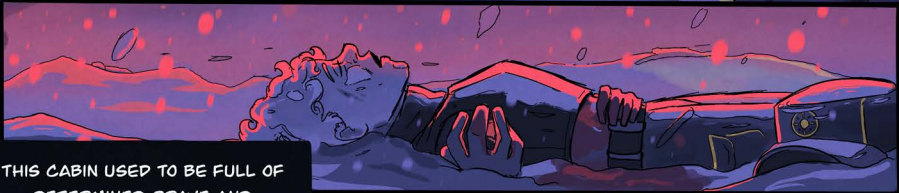
- Renee Martin



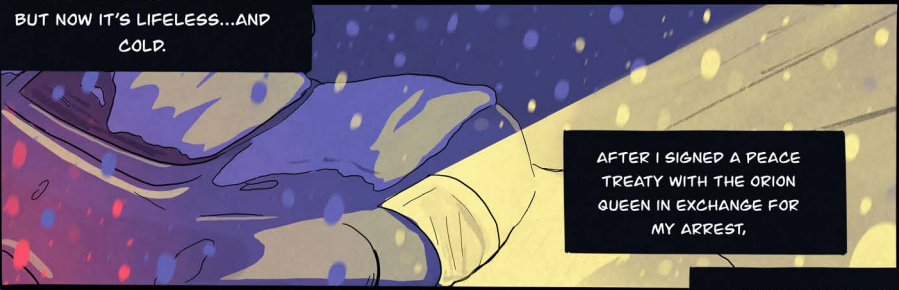


SOLAR SOLDIER LEADER LOG
ENTRY NO. 46: THE DATE IS
NOVEMBER 16TH, 3023.

I DON'T KNOW WHERE TO START,
OR HOW TO EXPLAIN HOW IT ALL
WENT WRONG.



THIS CABIN USED TO BE FULL OF
DETERMINED, BRAVE AND
KINDRED SOLDIERS OF MINE...
BUT NOW IT'S LIFELESS...AND
COLD.



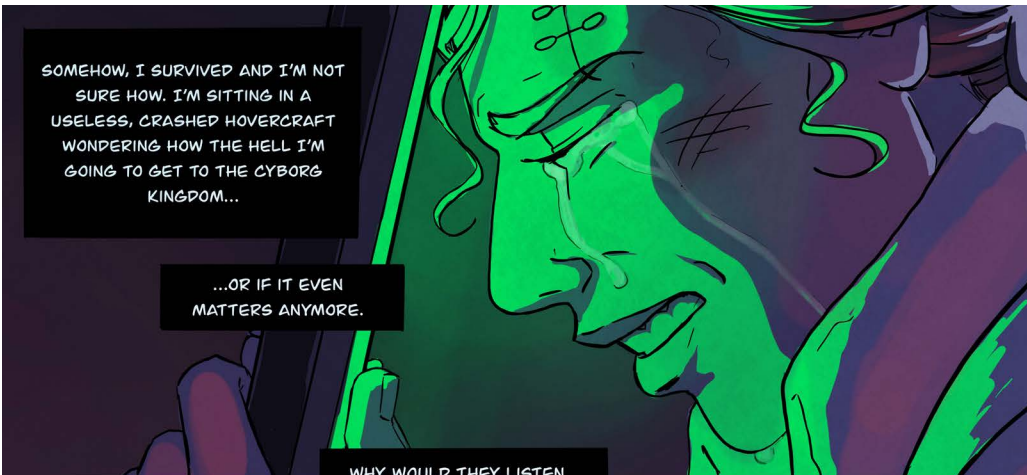
AFTER I SIGNED A PEACE
TREATY WITH THE ORION
QUEEN IN EXCHANGE FOR
MY ARREST,

I FAKED MY DEATH
AND ESCAPED
EXECUTION.



SHE HAS NO KNOWLEDGE OF THIS
MISSION AS FAR AS I KNOW. MY
UNDERGROUND NATION IS SAFE
FROM HER BECAUSE OF THE
TREATY.





SOMEHOW, I SURVIVED AND I'M NOT SURE HOW. I'M SITTING IN A USELESS, CRASHED HOVERCRAFT WONDERING HOW THE HELL I'M GOING TO GET TO THE CYBORG KINGDOM...

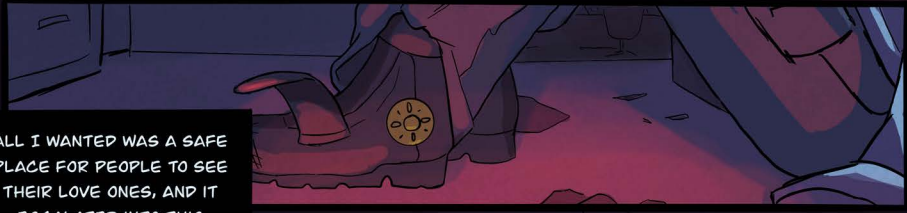
...OR IF IT EVEN MATTERS ANYMORE.



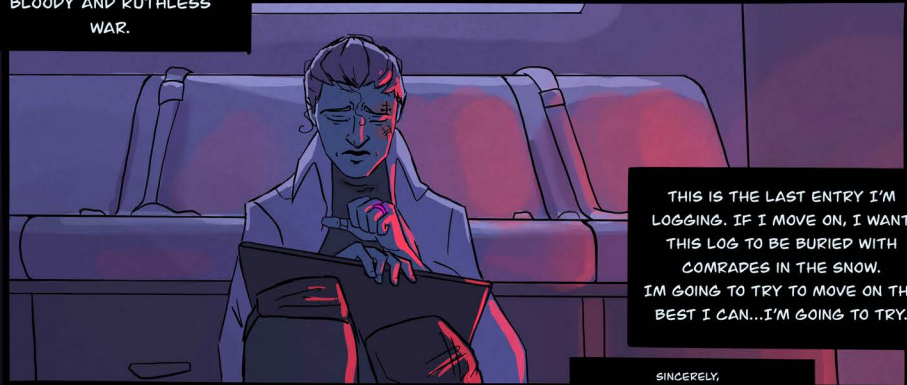
WHY WOULD THEY LISTEN TO ME? WHO AM I TO TRUST? I'VE FAILED MY SOLDIERS, MY FRIENDS, AND MYSELF.



I'LL SURELY DIE IF I GO BACK, BUT I DON'T KNOW HOW I CAN MOVE WITHOUT MY CREW.



ALL I WANTED WAS A SAFE PLACE FOR PEOPLE TO SEE THEIR LOVE ONES, AND IT ESCALATED INTO THIS BLOODY AND RUTHLESS WAR.



THIS IS THE LAST ENTRY I'M LOGGING. IF I MOVE ON, I WANT THIS LOG TO BE BURIED WITH COMRADES IN THE SNOW. I'M GOING TO TRY TO MOVE ON THE BEST I CAN...I'M GOING TO TRY.

SINCERELY,
MICHELLE ARCHER, LEADER OF THE
SOLAR SOLDIERS

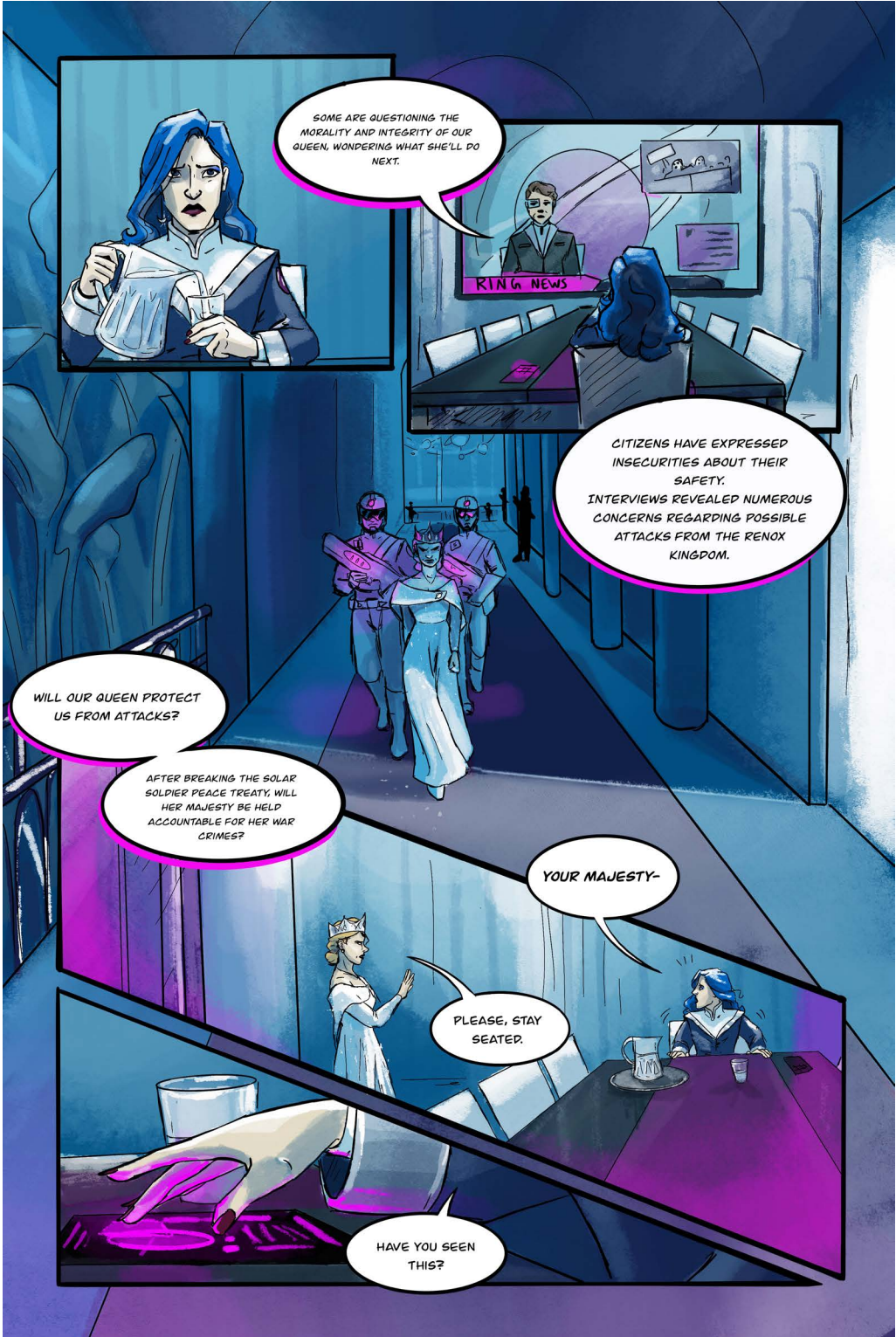












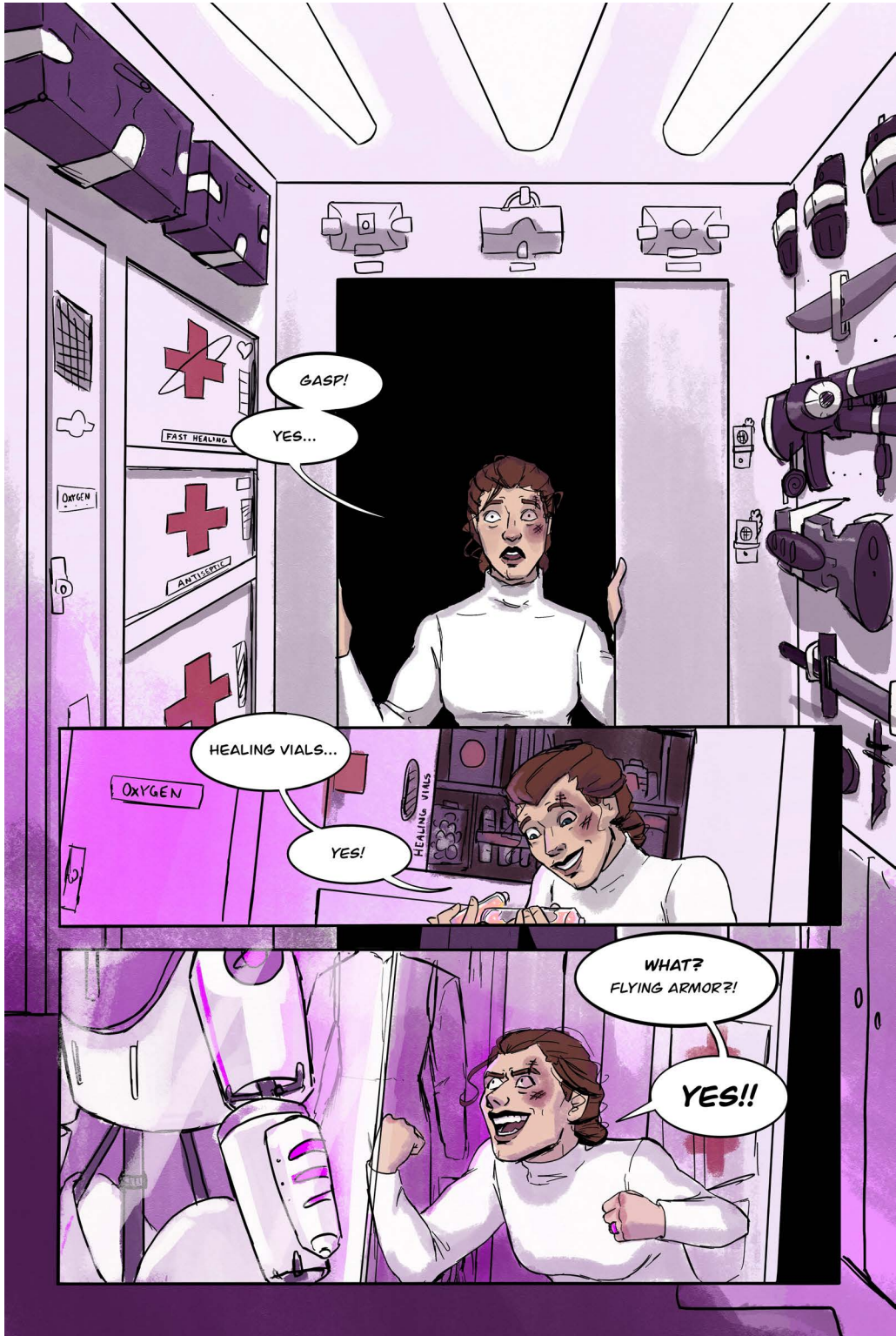


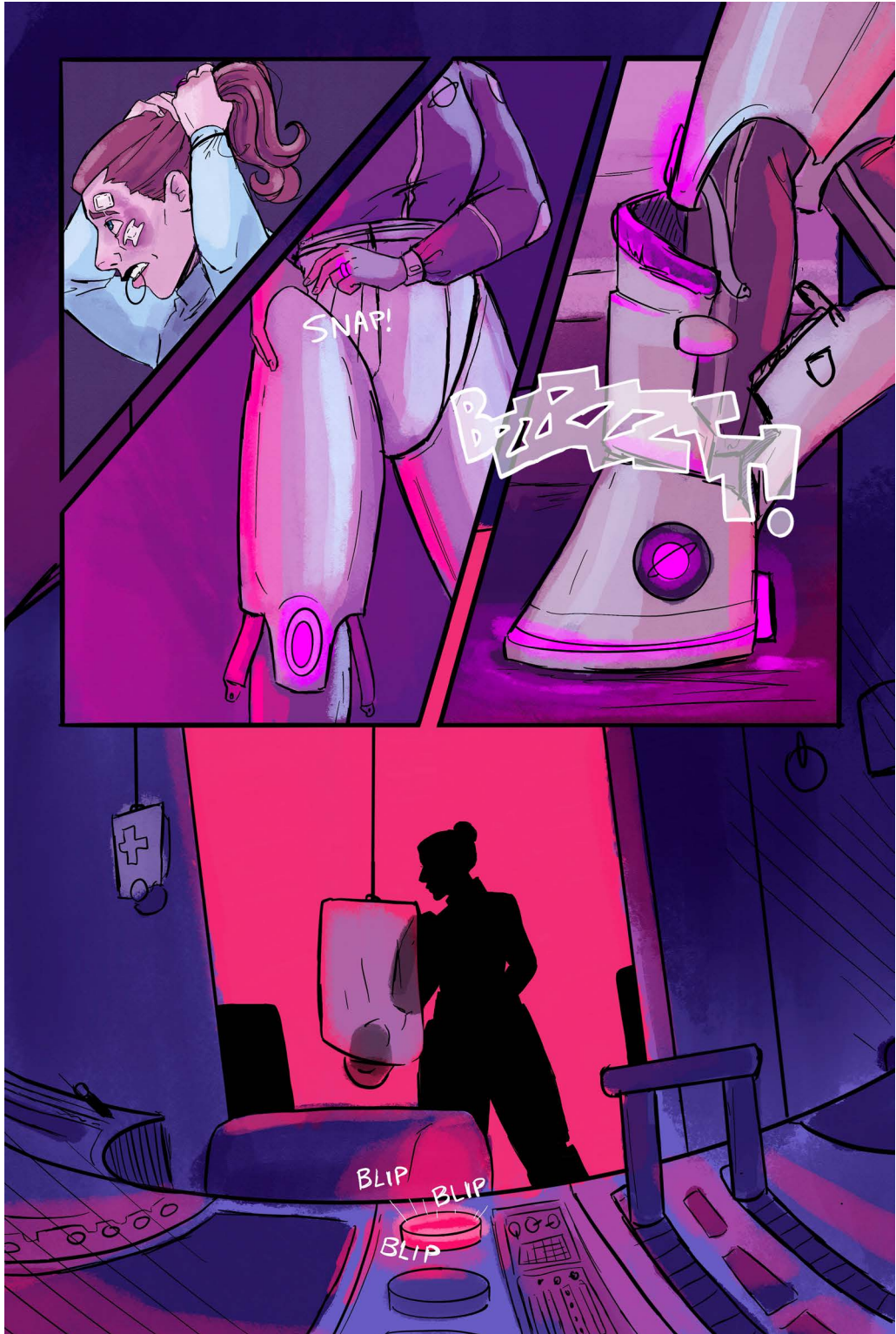












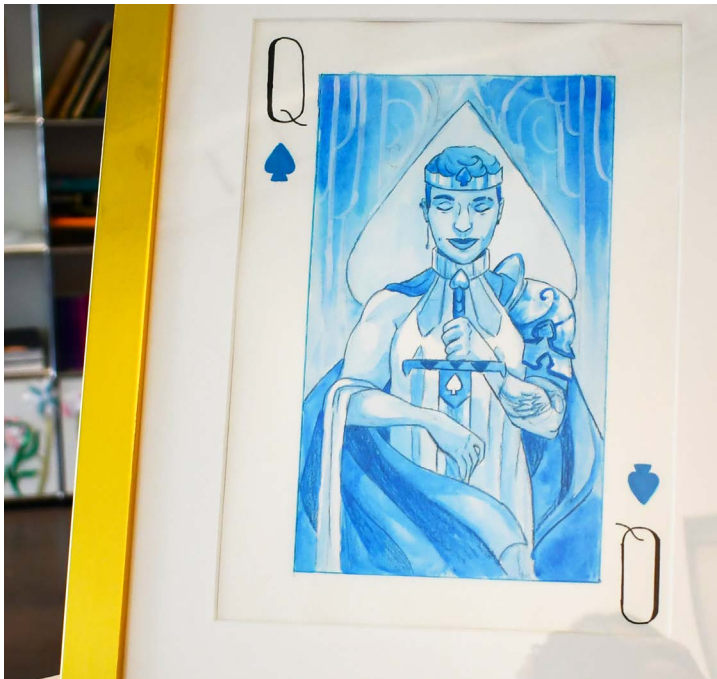


THESIS EXHIBITION

My thesis exhibition, *My Love Letter to Women: Giving Women Agency in Comics*, featured a mix of traditional studio pieces and the comic-making process at Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center.

Solar Soldier, my graphic novel, was displayed on a large television screen; it flipped through all the pages I've rendered and colored. Two covers were presented on large poster boards, and a mock workstation resided in a large corner. The work station resembles how I produce these pages in real time, including pinned character sheets, a ballpoint pen, and a paper pad.





For traditional media, I redesigned the queen cards of a deck as monochromatic, watercolor illustrations. Each suite represented the different parts of femininity with different characters. These characters are real women in my life, and they chose what suite they identified with the most. The meanings of each suite and how they connect to femininity are below.

Hearts: Hearts are a renowned symbol of love and passion. This suite represents emotional intelligence, companionship, and the bridge across all divisions of the world and of life. Hearts are also considered the center of traditional femininity and beauty.

Clubs: The club suite is represented by a clover-like symbol, one that reminds you of earth. Clubs symbolize agriculture, harvest, and abundance. Traditionally, this suite symbolizes the lower class, or peasants. However, clubs represent the nurturing and gracious parts of femininity.

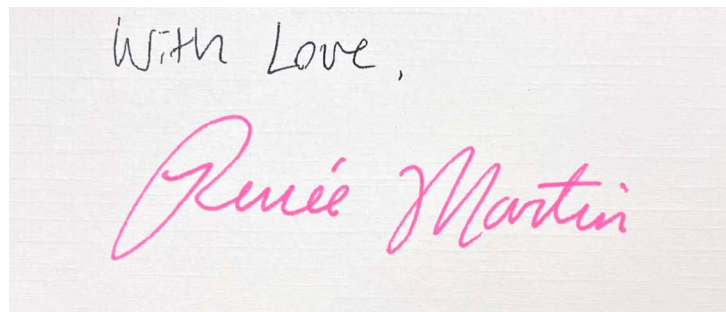
Diamonds: Diamonds represent wealth, luxury, and the upper-class members of society. This symbol also represents the implications of the responsibility wealthy and powerful individuals possess. In femininity, diamonds symbolize power, confidence, and a sense of leadership and responsibility.

Spades: The spade symbol almost resembles an arrowhead. Spades represent war, valor, and conflict. This suite also represents bravery and assertiveness in leadership and life. In femininity, spades symbolize leadership, protection, and a fighting spirit.

Another piece of traditional media was *Not Made for Your Consumption*, a 48x48 acrylic painting. This work was to connect myself with my formal studio roots, including hiring a model, creating study sketches, and working with paint by hand. I designed the concept of the main figure as a butterfly. The clothes are all black, and the wings were inspired by the Pipevine Swallowtail butterfly.

This piece is an homage to a work I sold at my undergraduate exhibition in 2022, *Chained Butterfly*. This piece depicted a butterfly woman flying with such vigor that she would inevitably break the chains from her wrists. Instead of a powerful woman overcoming oppression, I wanted to depict a powerful woman succumbing to violence against her. Even though she is fighting with her last breath, she loses her freedom, her autonomy, and her life; much like countless women today.





Lastly, I painted a mailbox with feminist messages and ornate patterns to present at the exhibition. Guests can open this mailbox to find it full of letters in pink envelopes; these letters were my handwritten message to women. This piece was the bridge that connected my work in comics to my direct message of giving women agency in sequential storytelling. These letters reminded the reader of their strength and to never let anyone silence them. It read a promise from myself as a creator to represent women from all backgrounds and ages with dignity, respect, and sincerity.

Dear Women and Girls of all ages and backgrounds,

This letter is not a wishlist, but a reminder that you deserve love, safety, autonomy, & agency in your life. You deserve to be heard & the right to speak. Your stories should be told with respect & love. I understand that life can be cruel to us, so never let anyone dim your light or take away your self-worth.

I understand the power I wield with my pen, & I choose to use that power responsibly. I solemnly promise to you, as a storyteller, to represent you with strength, power, & unapologetic femininity in beautiful & unbreakable ways. This is my vow to you, not as a fellow woman, but as a writer and illustrator. I promise to be bold, vocal, & loud; to design female characters with respect & honor.

Remember your voice; remember your beauty. If you ever forget your worth, read this letter again. I wish love, perseverance & strength wherever you go.

With Love,

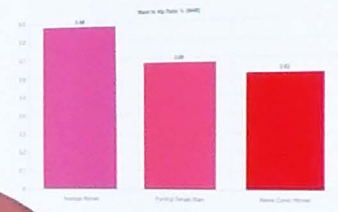
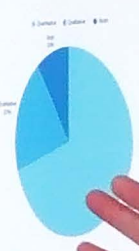
Renee Martin





Table 1: Summary of the data presented in the table. The table is organized into columns and rows, with the first column containing the names of the individuals and the subsequent columns containing their respective data points.

Name	Category	Value
John Doe	Category A	100
Jane Smith	Category B	200
Bob Johnson	Category C	300
Alice Brown	Category D	400
Charlie White	Category E	500
Diana Green	Category F	600
Frank Black	Category G	700
Grace King	Category H	800
Henry Lee	Category I	900
Ivy Clark	Category J	1000



OKLAHOMA

John Doe
Jane Smith
Bob Johnson
Alice Brown
Charlie White
Diana Green
Frank Black
Grace King
Henry Lee
Ivy Clark

THE FUTURE

As a future illustration professor and aspiring comic book creator, I understand that respectful and thoughtful representation in sequential storytelling matters. The wielder of the pen, or brush, holds immense power. In the famous last words of Spider-Man's Uncle Ben, "With great power comes great responsibility." I intend to take on this responsibility with sincerity and honor by representing both male and female characters as people. People who have flaws, vulnerabilities, and agency in their stories. Let this thesis be documented as not a conclusive end to my research and execution of practice, but a beginning to an enlightening and challenging career.

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